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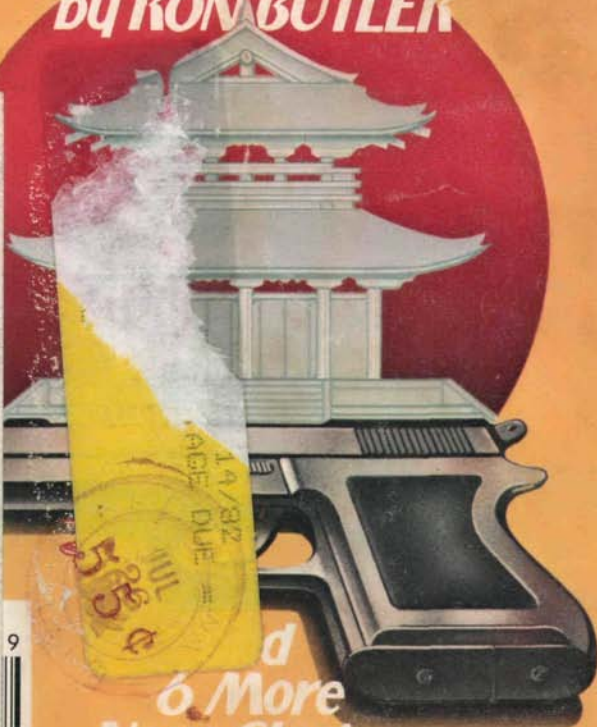
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HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

September, 1982

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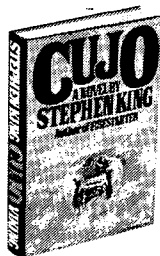
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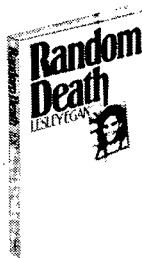
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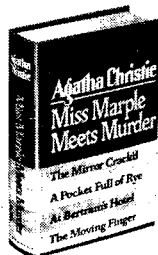
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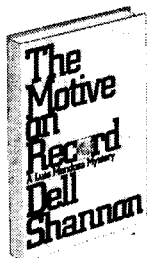
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Running & Fitness Day, October 9, 1982

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Cover by Ray VarnBuhler

EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

On May 7th, as we mentioned in this space in an earlier issue, the Mystery Writers of America gathered for their annual awards presentation. What follows is a listing of all the nominees and winners in the several categories—for, in fact, they are all winners. (The recipient in each category of the first place Edgar is in bold face; the runners-up received Scrolls.)

BEST NOVEL OF 1981:

Peregrine by William Bayer (Congdon & Lattes); *The Other Side of Silence* by Ted Allebeury (Scribner's); *Death in a Cold Climate* by Robert Barnard (Scribner's); *Dupe* by Liza Cody (Scribner's); *The Amateur* by Robert Littell (Simon & Schuster); *Bogmail* by Patrick McGinley (Ticknor & Fields).

BEST FIRST NOVEL OF 1981:

Chiefs by Stuart Woods (Norton); *Giant Killer* by Vernon Tom Hyman (Marek); *Not a Through Street* by Ernest Larsen (Random House); *Murder*

at the Red October by Anthony Olcott (Academy Chicago); *The Black Glove* by Geoffrey Miller (Viking).

BEST FACT CRIME OF 1981:

The Sting Man by Robert W. Greene (Dutton); *By Reason of Doubt* by Ellen Godfrey (Clarke, Irwin & Co., Ltd.); *The Minds of Billy Milligan* by Daniel Keyes (Random House); *The Day They Stole the Mona Lisa* by Seymour V. Reit (Summit); *Papa's Game* by Gregory Wallace (Rawson Wade).

BEST SHORT STORY OF 1981:

"The Absence of Emily" by Jack Ritchie (EQMM); "Seeds of Murder" by Nan Hamilton (AHMM); "A Token of Appreciation" by Donald Olson (AHMM); "The Miracle Day" by Ernest Savage (EQMM); "Mousie" by Robert Twohy (EQMM).

BEST PAPERBACK OF 1981:

The Old Dick by L. A. Morse (Avon); *Deadline* by John Dunning (Fawcett); *The Unforgiven* by Patricia J. MacDonald (Dell); *Pin* by Andrew Neiderman

(Pocket); *Dead Heat* by Ray Obstfeld (Charter).

BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF 1981:

What About Murder? by Jon L. Breen (Scarecrow Press); *The Whodunit* by Stefano Benvenuti and Gianni Rizzoni (Macmillan); *Selected Letters of Raymond Chandler* edited by Frank MacShane (Columbia University Press); *TV Detectives* by Richard Meyers (A. S. Barnes & Co.); *The Annotated Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* edited by Stephen Peithman (Doubleday).

BEST JUVENILE NOVEL OF 1981:

Taking Terri Mueller by Norma Fox Mazer (Avon); *Hoops* by Walter Dean Myers (Delacorte); *Village of the Vampire Cat* by Lensey Namioka (Delacorte); *Detective Mole and the Halloween Mystery* by Robert Quackenbush (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard); *Detour to Danger* by Eva-Lis Wuorio (Delacorte).

BEST MOTION PICTURE OF 1981:

Cutter's Way, screenplay by Jeffrey Alan Fiskin, based on

the novel *Cutter and Bone* by Newton Thornburg (United Artists); *Prince of the City*, screenplay by Jay Presson Allen and Sidney Lumet, based on the book by Robert Daley (Orion); *Body Heat*, original screenplay by Lawrence Kasdan (Ladd); *The Eye of the Needle*, screenplay by Stanley Mann based on the novel by Ken Follett (Kingsroad).

BEST TV PROGRAM OF 1981:

Killjoy by Sam H. Rolfe (CBS-TV); *Mickey Spillane's Margin for Murder* by Calvin Clements, Jr. (CBS-TV); *A Small Killing* by Burt Prelutsky (CBS-TV).

BEST TV PROGRAM IN A SERIES OF 1981:

"Hill Street Station" (Hill Street Blues) by Steven Bochco and Michael Kozoll (NBC-TV); "Stain of Guilt" (*Quincy*) by Sam Egan (NBC-TV); "Simon Eyes" (*Simon and Simon*) by Philip DeGuere (CBS-TV).

Congratulations to them all!

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A by Ron Butler MATTER OF CHANCES

After years of cautious driving in Japan, I finally managed the unspeakable—misjudging the narrowness of one of Okayama's back roads and driving our car into a drainage ditch with concrete sides and bottom.

The damage was severe.

I considered it humiliating, Police Inspector Toshihiko Ueki thought it was amusing, and Noriko, my practical wife, said it was the proper time to buy a new car.

So, armed with a briefcase containing several bundles of ten thousand yen banknotes, my signet, and Noriko's instructions to shop wisely, I set out with Ueki one afternoon in search of a new vehicle.

After examining the offerings of several dealers, we settled on a canary yellow model which, we were assured, received more kilometers per liter than any other automobile in a comparable price range.

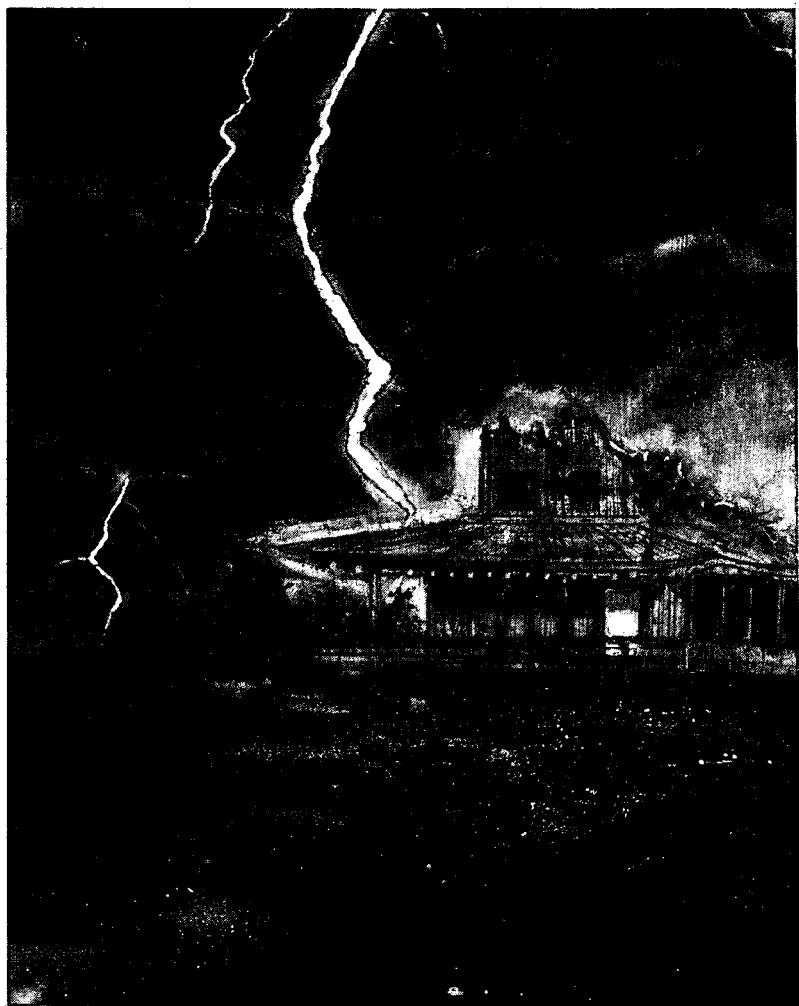


Illustration by Peter Kuper

There is no haggling about price in Japan, but certain ceremonies are considered polite. We sat down with the dealer, Omori-san, and drank green tea in his office while he carefully explained the warranty and certain technical specifications of the car. Inspector Ueki kept his face expressionless and asked a few nonessential questions.

Agreement was imminent, and Omori-san inquired if I had the proof of parking space required before a car can be bought. I produced the papers. Omori-san smiled, opened a desk drawer, and removed a number of forms.

Name? Sam Brent. Address? Tsushima District, Okayama. Occupation? Manager of a computer hardware office. Wife's name? Noriko. Personal reference? Wife's father, Inspector Ueki. Cash or credit purchase? Cash.

Omori-san placed several seals by the papers and began stamping them while I opened my briefcase and removed the amount of cash agreed upon. I then took my own seal and stamped the indicated spaces on the forms.

The dealer promised that the registration and insurance papers would be mailed soon and handed me the keys.

"That was simple enough," I remarked as I made my way cautiously through downtown traffic on our way back to my home.

Ueki kept his eyes straight ahead. "Yes, but please do not stray from the main roads."

He ignored my glare.

I parked the car in the narrow alley by the side of our house and honked the horn several times. Noriko, wearing her vinyl outdoor slippers, came to inspect the purchase. "The color is pleasing, but does it run well?"

"Perfectly. Shall we go for a ride? Maybe stop by and pick up your mother?"

"Oh, no, Sam," Noriko protested. "First we must take the car for *o-harai*."

"*O-harai*?"

Ueki wiped a smudge from the hood. "She is right, Sam. *O-harai* is a traditional form of Shinto purification, and we will have to take the car to a shrine for its blessing."

That was news to me. No foreigner should ever feel smug about how much he thinks he knows about Japan.

I asked Noriko the purpose of the blessing.

"It is so obvious, Sam. A new car is purified and blessed so that it will not be in an accident."

Ueki smiled. "Clearly, Sam, your old car did not receive a blessing."

I pocketed the keys. "Right, Toshihiko. No use taking chances, so I don't suppose you'll mind walking home. The exercise will do you good."

With a grin, I went into the house to file the car papers, and Ueki stalked off.

After dinner, in the dusky hour when the bats begin flitting across the skies, I went outside to admire the car again. I was removing the dealer's sticker when Noriko slid open the glass door and called me to the telephone. It was Mayor Yukuo Kawahara. "Ah, Mr. Brent. I trust that I have not interrupted your evening meal?"

"No, Kawahara-san, I'm not at all busy, and it's always good to hear from you." It was the truth; Kawahara-san was a rare man, combining broad intellectual and artistic interests with political finesse.

"Good. Then perhaps you will be able to come to my house. There is something I wish to discuss with you and Inspector Ueki."

If the inspector was to be there also, I suspected that the invitation might involve more than the merely social. I advised Noriko of my destination, took a flashlight, and left the house, cutting across the gravel driveway to the dirt path by the edge of the small river in front of our house. After passing Dr. Hashimoto's house on the left, I walked along the edge of the large rice paddy that was home to countless green frogs whose song filled the night. Five minutes later, I reached the massive stone gateway to Kawahara-san's property. Several cars, including Inspector Ueki's, were parked in the circular driveway, and I hurried across the flagstone terrace and knocked at the door. Mrs. Kawahara welcomed me at the entranceway, handing me a pair of house slippers, then led me to the mayor's study.

Mayor Kawahara was dressed in his casual black kimono, and from Inspector Ueki's golf attire, I knew he was relinquishing a practice session at the driving range. Kawahara bowed slightly, then shook my hand. "Permit me to apologize again, Mr. Brent, for taking up your time, but a rather serious matter has come to

my attention. Perhaps Inspector Ueki will explain."

Ueki nodded and placed his glass of Japanese scotch on an end table. "We seem to be having a rash of unexplained robberies involving individual victims."

"Muggings?" I was surprised. Stealing of any kind was still a rarity in Japan, except in the larger cities with a heavy inflow of tourists.

"Not exactly muggings, Sam," Ueki explained. "During the past several nights, some rather important businessmen have been robbed of large sums of cash after business dinners."

I accepted a bottle of Kirin beer from the mayor. "That seems like a routine police matter to me."

Mayor Kawahara laughed politely. "Stealing in our country is never routine, Mr. Brent, and this matter is all the more confusing because we know the exact whereabouts of the victims on the nights they were robbed, yet we are unable to determine the method or the kinds of persons responsible."

Ueki pulled the wrapping from a pack of cigarettes. "It is a matter of pride, of what you sometimes call 'face.'" He held a butane lighter to a cigarette. "The very fact that these robberies happened casts a shadow of shame on everyone involved—the restaurants and clubs that cater to the constant business gatherings, and the very people who cause discomfort by being victimized. It means that everyone who might have useful information is reluctant to talk for fear of adding to an already-shameful situation."

I turned to the mayor. "Kawahara-san, I have the feeling that there's something you and Toshihiko want me to do."

The mayor stood up behind his desk. "Indeed, Mr. Brent. As a respected businessman here, it would not be unusual for you to invite employees or associates out for an evening. Inspector Ueki, of course, would accompany you—as a guest."

"What you're trying to say is that I'd make good bait."

Ueki dusted lint from his jacket sleeve. "*Lure*, Sam, would be the more precise word."

The morning sky was slightly hazy, filled with high-drifting particles of yellowish sand carried from the Gobi Desert by the jet stream. After a light breakfast and coffee, Noriko and I drove to a shrine and parked in the special space reserved for new cars and trucks. A *kannushi* soon walked over to the line

of gleaming vehicles, clapped his hands several times, and recited prayers to drive away evil spirits. Then the shrine priest waved a branch of the *sakaki*, the sacred tree of Shinto.

I made a small donation and we returned home by the winding road that passes Okayama Shokadaigaku, the College of Business. While Noriko strung out our bedding on the clothes line and whacked away the dust with a bamboo paddle, I washed and waxed the car. That pleasant task completed, I went inside with Noriko and we discussed Inspector Ueki's plan for me to host parties until we gained some insights on the rash of robberies. She pulled a fresh cover on our *futon* and folded the floor bedding into its wall closet. "I am certain, Sam, that you will be in no danger if my father is with you."

I switched on the television for the start of an exhibition baseball game featuring my favorite team, the Hiroshima Carps. "I hope not," I said.

On Monday night, I went to four fashionable nightclubs with Ueki and my chief clerk, Goto-san. Casual questioning of the hostesses revealed nothing beyond expressions of regret. At each stop, I made a show of a healthy bankroll, but no one seemed to be paying undue attention, and Ueki finally suggested that we call it quits for the night. "It may be that we will have a better chance to acquire information on some other occasion."

I laughed. "You mean to tell me police investigation depends on chance?"

"To some extent," Ueki said slowly, "many matters in life are chance events—such as driving one's car into a ditch."

I asked the cab driver to drop me off first, then to take Goto home. Ueki could pay the fare.

In the morning, I was going over some orders with Goto when Inspector Ueki walked into the office and took a seat on the sofa in front of my desk. "We have a serious new development, Sam."

I handed a sheaf of papers to Goto. "What happened?"

Ueki accepted a cup of tea from my secretary. "Murder." He pulled a notebook from his jacket pocket and opened it. "The man was Shiro Kawachi, owner of a sample shop that makes those wax food models used to advertise restaurant offerings." Ueki replaced the notebook and stared at the calligraphy scroll on the wall. "It is very bad, Sam. Kawachi-san was stabbed, and his body thrown

in the river near the Flower Restaurant, only a few meters from the entrance to his apartment building."

"Excuse me, inspector," Goto said, "but why would anyone want to kill him?"

"I believe, Goto-san, that Kawachi was robbed and then killed because he could identify the person responsible."

Goto frowned. "*Dame.*" No good.

"Not good at all," Ueki agreed. "The newspapers have already been critical of the robberies, and the slaying is certain to produce increased pressure for a solution."

"So what do you plan to do now?" I asked.

Ueki straightened his tie. "Tonight, if you and Goto-san do not mind, I would like for you once more to be conspicuous in the display of wealth."

Our first stop, after meeting Ueki at police headquarters, was the Jun restaurant, which specializes in *okozei*, a succulent fish that resembles a sea robin but tastes like pompano. I appreciated the atmosphere of the place—the globefish lanterns that hung from the ceiling and the friendly chatter of the men behind the counter as they wielded their long knives, slicing fish, halving boiled crab, dicing vegetables. I was spearing the last piece of tomato on my plate when a man sitting to my right turned and grinned, speaking in tormented English. "Chopsticks not so hard for you, yes?"

"Actually," I replied in Japanese, "I prefer *hashi* to a knife and fork."

He smiled apologetically. "I can tell that you lived in Japan a long time. You must be in business here."

"Computer hardware's my line." I nodded at Goto and Inspector Ueki. "Tonight I'm just relaxing with some friends." Accurate enough, I thought. The chances of my getting information on the robberies and murder seemed pretty slim, but I was enjoying the attempt.

"Ah, so *desuka?*" Is that a fact? The man cleared his throat, then continued. "Maybe I can be of service." He removed a business card from his wallet and handed it to me. "I work for the Yoshimoto Driving Service, and if you wish, I can arrange to pick up you and your party later."

I examined the card. "Sensui Shoji. Sure, Shoji-san, why not?" I turned to my companions. "Why don't we make the Club Estralita our last stop? Is it okay with you if Shoji-san picks us up there? That way we won't have to wait for a cab if it's a busy night."

"Hae," Ueki said, "*i desho*." Yes, that will be fine.

I handed Shoji one of my own cards. "If your fee isn't too high, you might as well take us to the Club Royale first." The figure he named, while slightly higher than cab rates, was reasonable. I paid the check and Shoji went to get his car.

Inspector Ueki took some pistachios from the glass bowl in the center of the table. "Your idea is interesting, Sam, but I do not think there is much chance of its being the right one."

"Why not?" I insisted. "Who's the last person a man usually sees before he returns home from a night of business socializing?"

Goto looked up from his snack of pickled plums. "As no one who drinks is allowed to drive, it would be a friend or a hired driver."

Ueki snorted. "And how many dishonest taxi drivers or disreputable driving services do you know about?"

Goto grinned. "None, Inspector Ueki. Nevertheless, when we go out for an evening, someone must take us home."

Ueki looked across the room, watching the three young women in western-style dress as they arranged glassware and made other preparations for the crush of customers who would start crowding in after nine o'clock. "Assuming a criminal inclination in some aberrant taxi operator, how does the unfortunate passenger manage to lose his money without being aware of the crime?"

"I don't know about you, Toshihiko," I said, "but if I make the rounds after a long day at the office, I usually manage to sleep all the way back."

Ueki pushed his chair back from the table and stood up. "To humor you, I will return to headquarters and reexamine the names of the places the victims frequented and leave instructions for my men to check the records of the taxi companies they used. That, I assume, will satisfy you?"

"Leave nothing to chance, Toshihiko. That's my motto."

The inspector stared down at me for a moment. "Very well, I will meet you and Goto-san at the Club Estralita."

The feeling of a minor triumph remained until I remembered

that Ueki had our expense money with him.

Goto's eyes widened as we entered the Club Estralita. "*Takai desho*," he whispered. It's going to be expensive. His reasoning wasn't hard to follow. The hostesses were all older women wearing expensive kimonos and obis, their facial features accentuated by the contrast of light and dark makeup sometimes associated with the nearly-defunct class of geishas. The long, U-shaped bar was elaborately handcrafted, and the wing chairs surrounding the tables were upholstered in a rich, red velvet that glowed softly under massive chandeliers.

We were still gawking when one of the hostesses walked up to us, smiling. "You've got to be Sam Brent." She rewarded my look with a tinkling laugh. "My name is Lois. Lois Furuta, and in case you can't figure it out, I'm not a native. San Francisco's home."

I returned her smile. "Okay, Lois, so what are you doing here?"

She led us to a table in a quiet corner of the club, then went on: "My family has relatives in Okayama, and one of them manages the club. When I visit every few years, the job helps meet expenses, and it also keeps me fluent in Japanese."

I liked her. "How'd you know my name?"

"Inspector Ueki called and left a message. He wants you to call him at his office."

We ordered scotches and water and I borrowed a ten yen coin from Goto for the pay phone. Ueki's line was busy, so I waited a few minutes and tried again. Still no luck, so I rejoined Goto at the table. Lois Furuta sat down with us, and we began swapping stories about life in Japan—speaking in Japanese for Goto's benefit. Several drinks later, I remembered Ueki and went to the phone. This time there was no answer, and when I went back to our table, Shoji-san was standing there.

"I am ready to drive you home whenever you are ready." He paused, looking at the two glasses on the table. "I see that your other companion is absent."

"Yes," I said, "he got involved with some other business. You ready to go, Goto-san?"

"Yes, I am a little tired."

"Okay, Shoji-san, we're all yours."

Inspector Ueki handed the police sergeant a list of names and

ordered him to start calling the taxi companies. There was nothing else that could be done until morning, or was there? Frowning, Ueki clasped his hands behind his back and began pacing the office. Yoshimoto—the name of the driving service—rang a distant bell of memory. Ueki glanced at his watch. There was still ample time for him to get to the Club Estralita. He walked to the Communications Room, pulled up a stool, and typed out an information request to all of the major stations on the teletype link.

Thirty minutes later, the machine commenced a staccato reply. Ueki leaned over the machine, his expression anxious, then ripped the completed message from the teletype and read it again. Yasuhiro Yoshimoto, according to the records, was connected with one of the major *yakuza* gangster organizations based in Tokyo. Tucked away among his suspected activities in gambling, drugs, and prostitution was a seemingly-legitimate string of driving services in Tokyo, Nagoya, Kyoto, Osaka, and—now—Okayama.

Chewing his lip nervously, Ueki tapped out another data request. This time, the replies took less time: there were no arrest records for a Sensui Shoji, but the police in each of the major cities where Yoshimoto operated a driving service reported a number of unsolved robberies—all at night.

The pieces were falling into a pattern now! If Yoshimoto enlisted men without prior arrests, they could undertake the driving service robberies periodically without drawing suspicion. But would a man like Shoji kill? Yes, if one of his victims were sufficiently alert to catch him in the act, threatening to spoil another source of illicit income.

Sam and Goto! There might, then, be a very real element of danger if Shoji picked them up.

The inspector dialed the number for the Club Estralita and waited for an answer.

Goto closed his eyes as Shoji drove away, and, after a few moments, I did the same, soothed by the familiar sounds of the entertainment district: the cries of vendors selling hot baked sweet potatoes from handcarts, the shouted advertisements of barkers stationed in front of garish nightclubs, the laughter of men making their way through crowded lanes, the honking of cabs as they waited for their fares outside of bars and restaurants. I let myself doze off with thoughts of the hot bath Noriko would have ready for

me, and didn't awaken until I heard the sound of tires crunching over gravel.

Goto was no longer seated next to me. "Did you take my friend home first?"

Shoji got out, opened the door, and leaned in. The light of a nearly-full moon framed his figure.

"Yes, Bulentu-san. He is home now, and so are you."

But Shoji had been lying, for Goto had never arrived. Inspector Ueki's voice was tight with emotion. "I am so sorry, Sam. It is my fault that this happened." He declined an offer of coffee from Noriko, pressing his hands flat against the kitchen table. "If I had not delayed so long at my office, I could have returned to the club before you and Goto left with Shoji, and our friend would not be a prisoner."

I took Noriko's hand. "And if we'd used our common sense, we would have waited. It's more my fault than yours, Toshihiko, because if I hadn't been asleep, Shoji wouldn't have tried to take Goto." I was feeling sick. "Probably he had to hurt him to do it without tipping me off."

Noriko squeezed my hand. "No one is at fault, Sam. Everything that went wrong was a matter of chances."

Chances! I was getting tired of the word. "Yeah, maybe." I tapped the note that had arrived hours ago in the mail. "Do we pay the ransom to Shoji and let him go free, or do you take your men and go after him?"

Ueki shook his head slowly. "Sam, the note is explicit. Shoji is threatening to kill Goto-san if you do not go to meet him as instructed—by yourself." He fished a bent cigarette from a pack in his shirt pocket. "It is what Shoji has not written that causes me anxiety."

"Like what?"

"Even if you pay, Sam, there is no guarantee that Shoji will not kill Goto, and try to kill you."

The amount Shoji wanted was large—he had taken time to check me out. "We've got the money from the bank. I'd give anything we have to get Goto back unharmed."

"Fortunately," Ueki said, "we may have a slight advantage." I couldn't think of what it might be; after two days of anxious waiting, it seemed to me that Shoji was holding all the high cards. "I

believe that Shoji is assuming you will pay without going to the police. It may be in his thoughts that your company would be displeased with the scandal that would erupt if harm were allowed to befall Goto-san, and he is willing to take this risk. If he succeeds, he will rise dramatically in the opinion of his boss, Yoshimoto."

"I can follow that, but my question is still the same: What the hell do we do?"

"Do, Sam?" Ueki stood up and put his arms around Noriko's shoulders. "We will take the money to the place specified by Shoji, which is not far from here. We must try to take him by surprise, with a minimum of support. After that, we can only do our best."

Inspector Ueki drove slowly over the unlit country road, then stopped at a clearing by the foot of a small mountain, cutting the lights and engine.

Moonlight, diffused by a thin layer of clouds scudding in from the Inland Sea, revealed little more than a dirt pathway surrounded by tall pines. "You said this was a temple, Toshihiko?"

Ueki drew his service revolver and checked the ammunition. "Actually, it is an unfinished temple. It was badly damaged by a bombing raid during the war, and no one has ever completed construction."

I couldn't think of anything else to delay the inevitable. "Okay, I'm going to get started." I took a flashlight from the seat, picked up the large brown envelope crammed with currency, opened my door, and got out quietly.

"Remember," Ueki said softly, "I will not be far behind." The wind was rising sharply, and I sensed the rain coming in behind it. The top of the mountain was shrouded in darkness, and I turned on the flashlight and started up the path.

The plank steps leading to the entrance of the temple were charred, and, as I turned the flashlight in an arc, I could also see that many of the supporting beams were splintered and fire-blackened. Cautiously, I made my way up the planks and stood at the gaping entrance. There was a long, dazzling display of lightning to the south, and I saw Shoji's leering face just inside the doorway.

"Inside," he ordered, "and move very slowly." I complied, directing the cone of light toward the floor. Shoji moved closer, waving the gun at me. "Now, give me the money."

I held out the envelope. "Where's Goto-san? You promised to let him go once you got your money."

Shoji reached out and grabbed the envelope with his left hand. "I will now take you to Goto, and both of you will depart together—to your graves."

There was a rumble of thunder beyond the mountain, and then the crack of Ueki's voice. "Do not move, Shoji, or you are dead!"

Shoji fired two quick shots toward the entrance, then turned and ran as I dropped to the floor. I was lying in darkness, the broken flashlight somewhere on the floor, when I heard a whisper nearby. "Sam. Sam, are you all right?"

"Yeah, no damage." I got up, heart thudding, and felt Ueki's hand on my arm. "He's in here somewhere, Toshihiko."

Outside, a driving rain began, slapping hard against the temple roof. "I am going after him, Sam. Please remain where you are."

From the occasional flickers of lightning, I could see the inspector moving toward one of the corridors branching away from the large, empty chamber we were in. There was nothing that was going to keep me glued to a safe spot while Ueki was putting himself in danger. As I walked toward the interior of the temple, groping my way along the walls, the darkness was almost total. Then, almost too quickly to register on my mind, there was a strange, high-pitched twitter, followed almost instantly by a series of flashes and sharp explosions.

Ueki's voice, a few meters ahead of me, was calm. "It is safe now, Sam." A small flame spouted into existence. Ueki, cigarette lighter in one hand, was kneeling by Shoji.

"Is he dead?"

Ueki searched for a pulse in Shoji's throat. "No, but he will cause us no more problems. Now we must hurry. I am very concerned about Goto-san."

We left Shoji bleeding on the floor and started our search. It ended in an alcove toward the rear of the temple. Goto was there, propped motionless in a corner, hands and feet tied, a gag in his mouth. I held the cigarette lighter, and, for the second time that night, Ueki felt for a pulse.

"Toshihiko?"

In the unsteady yellowish light, Ueki seemed to be a thousand years old. "We must hurry, Sam."

Each of us was wrapped up in his own thoughts, and I wasn't in the mood to enjoy even the luxury of a reserved seat in the Green Car as our Shinkansen bullet train sped eastward in the fading afternoon night. Our destination this day was a mystery; Inspector Ueki had kept it a secret from everyone, including Noriko and his own wife. "It is necessary." That was all he would say, and I knew him better than to probe for more.

As we passed Himieji on our left, Goto unconsciously touched the white bandages binding his head and addressed Ueki. "Excuse me, Inspector Ueki, but would you mind if you explained how you managed to stop Shoji so effectively when you could not see him?"

Ueki, whose seat was swiveled to face us, smiled. "Only if you and Sam will be my guests in the restaurant car. I seem to be developing a thirst."

Why not? I nodded to Goto, and we made our way through the lurching, swaying cars until we reached Number Eight and were seated at a table in the rear. The attractive young woman in a green uniform wrote down our orders and returned shortly with three large bottles of beer and glasses.

Ueki poured. "Here's to Goto-san's fortunate recovery, and to the end of a most unpleasant situation." Fortunate was the right word, I thought. Goto's price for being involved with Shoji was a hairline skull fracture and a concussion that could have been a lot worse.

Goto wiped his mouth with a napkin. "I am still curious as to how you were able to shoot Shoji in the dark."

Ueki rummaged through his jacket pockets until he found a pack of cigarettes. "The temple where Shoji took you after, ah, rapping your head so rudely was to be a smaller version of the Chion-in Temple in Kyoto. However, as I told Sam, the war interrupted. Luckily for all of us, the interior was completed and escaped most of the fire damage."

Goto was sucking his breath in sharply in apparent appreciation of the information, but I was in a fog. "Interesting, Toshihiko, but so what?"

The inspector smiled at me tolerantly. "In the feudal days of our history, Sam, temples were sometimes robbed of their treasures, so a famous architect designed floor boards that make a sound like the *ugui-su* bush warbler when someone walks over them." He emptied his glass and paused while Goto refilled it. "As you may

guess, this sound alerted the guardian priests and thwarted theft."

"So you simply fired in the direction of the bird song and chanced to hit Shoji."

Ueki's face was solemn. "As I have said so often in the recent past, much of life is a matter of chance, and much of success is knowing how to make the most of it."

My mood was still foul. "What about Yoshimoto? Is it chance that lets him remain free while others continue to do his dirty work for him?"

"Not so much chance," Ueki said, "as the necessity for slow, legal procedure in a civilized land. Sooner or later, fortune will desert Yoshimoto."

Bells chimed over the public address system, followed by announcements in Japanese and English that we were preparing to stop in Nagoya.

Inspector Ueki picked up the check. "*Ikimashoka?*" Shall we go? "This is our stop."

We caught a taxi in front of the Nagoya Station and Ueki directed the driver to take us to the Atsuta Shrine.

"Listen, Toshihiko," I said somewhat sharply, "how come another shrine?" I felt that I'd visited enough shrines and temples to last me a while.

Ueki's tone was patient. "We are going to this shrine because tonight is Warai Matsuri."

"The night of the Laughing Festival?" I was mystified, and let it show.

"Yes, it will do all of us good."

"I don't know about Goto-san, but I think this is crazy." I couldn't purge the memory of Shoji, boasting almost insanely from his hospital bed, admitting freely that he killed the "fool" Kawachi when that luckless man awakened while Shoji was taking his money, describing how he knocked Goto out and left him tied up on the pathway leading to the temple near my home without disturbing my slumber, and swearing that he would say no more even if he went to the gallows—which he would. Shoji's warped loyalty had saved Yoshimoto, and I saw no cause for laughter.

"Sam," Ueki said, "I would not call this trip insane, although I did not want our wives to know our destination because I feared they might share your opinion. This festival is unique, and I think

its influence will be salubrious."

At the shrine, I paid the driver, and we found several hundred people already present, milling about, taking pictures, and purchasing souvenirs from stands outside the ancient wood structure.

"I hate to admit this, inspector," Goto said, "but I have forgotten the history of this festival."

"In the year 686 of the Christian calendar," Ueki told us, "the Sun Goddess is supposed to have consigned a sword to the care of this shrine. It was called the Great Grass Cutting Sword, one of three special gifts bestowed on her imperial descendants by the goddess." He fumbled with his lighter for a moment, trying to light a cigarette in a brisk breeze.

"This gift of the great sword," he went on, "is considered a happy occasion in our history. Thus, the name of the commemoration—the Laughing Festival."

I didn't feel any better after the explanation. "Japan has a lot of festivals."

Ueki smiled. "Any excuse for a holiday."

A golden yellow moon shone above the shrine like a paper lantern. The grounds were filled, and a hush descended over the people as the priests began the prayers seeking purification and exorcism. We watched as the robed priests retreated to a dark place in the deepest realms of the shrine. No one spoke, and except for an occasional muffled cough, there were no other sounds.

And then we heard the priests, totally hidden from sight.

At first, they giggled. The giggles turned to chuckles, chortling, and then full-bellied guffaws, rolling over the shrine grounds in merry peals.

I watched in amazement as one after another of the people around us began laughing. Ueki stood tall and unyielding for several minutes before it hit him, and, when Goto started to laugh, I pinched myself, even bit my lip and dredged up bitter thoughts about Shoji and Yoshimoto. It was futile. The titters soared into flights of maniacal cachinnation, gusts of unbridled mirth that left me weak. Ueki slapped Goto on the back, and Goto dropped to his knees helplessly, laughing so violently that no sound emerged from his mouth.

It was impossible to utter more than a few words, and I struggled

vainly to catch my breath, wiping away a stream of uncontrollable tears.

We were carried along with the howling crowd. Men and women walked up to each other, pointed, and broke into whoops of delight. After two hours, we were exhausted, and Ueki managed to stammer that it was time to leave.

There were several taxis parked near the shrine, and we entered one, still laughing wildly. The infection spread to the driver, and we sat there for several minutes before Ueki gained sufficient control to ask the driver to take us to a noodle shop for a late snack.

When I dropped my change, the driver doubled over, shrieking. We entered the shop still shaking with glee, and several of its customers who had been at the shrine earlier went into fits of rollicking mirth when they saw us.

We ordered tempura soba, hot green noodles served with shrimp in a steaming broth, and when I dropped my chopsticks in my lap it produced a near-violent reaction in all of us. Even the elderly serving woman was smitten so hard with hilarity that she had to sit down. I poured a cup of sake for her, resulting in more bursts of merriment, and she brought us another full ceramic bottle—on the house.

Goto pointed to a clock on the wall, too weak to speak, and we knew that we had missed the last train home. The inn where we stayed echoed with outbreaks of happiness through the night. No one objected.

We returned to Okayama shortly before noon, carefully avoiding direct eye contact to prevent further eruptions. The taxi driver let us out in front of my house, where Noriko and Mrs. Ueki stood talking in the garden.

"Did you have a good trip?" Noriko inquired.

I looked at Ueki. The inspector looked at Goto. And we started up again, defenseless against the residual influence of the festival.

"Good. Great. Fine," I finally managed.

We left the women standing there and went inside to the family room where we dropped to the sofa, overcome again. It passed eventually, and Ueki got up to open a window. "Tell me, my friends, do you feel better about life now?"

Goto choked off a laugh. "Even crime and problems cannot spoil the happiness of good friends. Maybe that is an old proverb."

I couldn't help myself, and soon Ueki and Goto were laughing with me again.

I walked outside with them and stood next to Noriko as they got into Ueki's car. Noriko waved a final farewell and turned to me. "Sam, how much money did you give to the priests when the car was blessed?"

"Oh, I don't know. Not much. Maybe a thousand yen."

She folded her arms across her chest. "The next time, husband, please be more generous."

"Why?"

"If you will look at the right front fender of our car, you will see that only part of the blessing was effective."

The laughing festival was over.

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THE BLOW

by David Braly

The storm swept fast and violent up from the south. Little rain came with it, but plenty of strong, powerful wind.

Already mid-November, snow hadn't yet fallen in central Oregon. A mild autumn had followed a sweltering hot summer. There had been a few freezes, but apples still held to their branches and only half the leaves were down.

The big blow began Friday afternoon. The winds howled, sprayed dirt and leaves down the streets of Sawyerville, sometimes straight and sometimes around and around in twisting whirlpools of air. Sheets of rain came and went. People walked fast and used their coat collars to shield their necks when they hunched over.

Reginald Frohock watched the storm through his office's big window. His office was on the second floor, overlooking the mill yard. He watched the clouds move fast, the dust rise in the distance.

Nothing unusual, he thought. Normal weather for this week. He remembered two days ago it'd been windy. He remembered because that'd been Veteran's Day and he'd noticed the sidewalk flags stretching out from their poles. Usually they hung limply. They looked pretty when they stretched like that with the wind snapping them.

He returned to thinking about what he'd been thinking about for a year. Being broke.

The national recession followed a housing depression that still held fast. There were mill closures, layoffs, pay cutbacks, and hard times all over Oregon. Frohock was running his mill on one shift with one-third the usual work force, who had taken a ten percent pay cut. And there had been no orders for a month. He was only cutting lumber for inventory now and the inventory was already too large. He'd have to close the mill the middle of next week if an order didn't come in. He hadn't told anyone yet. Frohock was hoping for an order—for anything—to save him from shutting down.

He drove home at five. Trees were bending before the wind. The air was filled with dirt. Leaves flowed down the streets, lined the curbs. Telephone lines whipped and twisted between the poles, reminding Frohock of jumpropes being snapped by children.

Frohock drove into his driveway, stopped, locked and slid out of his Fleetwood. He walked toward his house. Behind him came a loud *bang*. He turned. He saw his across-the-street neighbor's unlatched storm door swinging, broken. He resumed walking toward his house. Two cats—neither of them his—huddled on the porch. A strong gust hit and they both jumped back, then relaxed a little. Frohock stepped up onto the porch but they stayed. Usually the cats would've run. Frohock walked inside his house, leaving the cats huddled on the porch.

He kissed his wife, rebuked his kids, and turned on the television in time for the five o'clock news.

The top news story was the big storm, the eye of which lay off Crescent City, California. Gale warnings were posted all up and down the Oregon coast. In Portland the gusts were up to sixty mph. The reporters talked about the strong winds, about the trouble that could be expected.

There was nothing on the news about what folks east of the Cascades could expect from the storm. But that was normal procedure for Portland television stations.

Frohock walked to a picture window, stared out. At five thirty it was already dark. He could see the black trees in motion against the less black sky. He could hear the howling and the tree branches slamming against the side of the house.

Frohock remembered when Typhoon Frieda hit Oregon in 1963. That was on Columbus Day and it was called the Columbus Day

Storm. He remembered letting himself fall into the wind and the wind holding him up. Oregon storms usually came on special days. Today was Friday the 13th.

He and his family ate dinner.

The rest of the evening was spent on a couple of business phone calls and watching television. Frohock worried that the electricity would go off or that the big transformer on Grizzly Mountain would be blown over as it usually was during big blows and he would miss seeing the night's episode of "Dallas."

The lights flickered a couple of times, but they stayed on. So did the television.

After "Dallas," Frohock stepped out on the porch to look at the storm. The across-the-street neighbor's storm door was slamming, cracking, banging. No one was home over there. He heard other doors slam, unhitched. Somewhere down the street someone's garbage can went over with a bang. Its garbage-in-rolling-metal-can-over-asphalt noise came nearer every minute.

When he returned inside the TV news people reported that there had been electrical outages in Coos and Curry counties and that there was also trouble on one of the interstates. They announced that a strong cold front would move into the center of the state from the north, early the next morning.

Frohock went to bed early but lay awake late into the night. He thought about the mill, about going broke, maybe bankrupt. The wind continued to howl outside and gusts would momentarily make the whole side of the house creak and strain. He could hear tree branches creaking outside, and garbage cans rolling in the streets.

He fell asleep thinking about bankruptcy.

A strong gust of wind woke him a half hour before it was time to get up. Everything was darker than usual. The wind still blew, howled, whistled hollowly.

Frohock got up.

When he looked out a window he saw the clouds racing north. Only two or three times during his life had he seen clouds travel that fast . . . except in movies when a hurricane came in. The clouds were dark grey against the light grey sky, moving fast and in unison.

He thought about going broke while he watched the clouds, and he thought of the way not to go broke. He also thought about how it would free himself of his father's legacy. The business had been

his father's, he'd never wanted to go into it and he hated every hour of work he put into it.

When he left for the mill, he saw that the metal rooster had been ripped off the weather vane. Real birds weren't around at all. Usually the trees around the house were filled with them. After the robins had eaten the plums, the sparrows, starlings, and woodpeckers had tackled the cedar berries and apples. There were always birds in the trees. But not today.

The leaves that Frohock had put off raking were almost all gone now. Those leaves that still remained were being blown off. They were someone else's problem now, not his.

Frohock slid into his Fleetwood and drove towards town. Leaves blew along the street towards him. A gigantic black raven picked at something in an empty lot, its feathers ruffled by the wind.

When he drove into town Frohock noticed how bright everything was. Although the sky was grey, the town looked brighter, clearer than normal. He supposed that it was partly because the wind had blown the mill smoke and ash out of the valley. But mostly it was because it'd blown all the leaves off the trees. All of them. There remained nothing to obscure the light from above so that the stormy day was brighter than a summer day.

He had to brake going down Main Street when three men dashed in front of him. They hurried to the tavern. Two entered. The other man paused to comb down his thin hair, then he followed his friends inside.

Frohock drove through town and out to the mill. Because it was Saturday the mill was empty.

He stopped in the deserted parking lot at the space marked "Reserved/Frohock."

Frohock got out of his car. He turned and looked toward the highway. No vehicle, no person was in sight.

Frohock walked to the mill. He unlocked the door into Cut Shop A, went through it out back to the sawdust and chips piles. Although it was daytime, the old spotlight still burned above the sawdust pile. It'd been installed when the mill was built to help the watchman deter thieves.

He'd laid off the watchman six months ago. There'd been no money to pay nonessential personnel.

It took him an hour to loosen and tumble the pole. When the spotlight fell to the ground, its glass burst and it ignited the saw-

dust just as Frohock had hoped that it would.

The mill carried \$500,000 in insurance. The policy had been taken out in 1967 and replacement costs had risen substantially since then. But the equipment in the mill was old, worth much less than \$500,000. And he wouldn't replace it, just take the money and retire to Southern California. He would get out of the lumber business forever, free himself of all its rollercoaster economics and risks, of its tough responsibilities and hard work.

The fire would be blamed on the wind.

He couldn't feel air in motion as he walked to his car. But a glance above reassured him that the wind was still blowing, and still blowing north.

When he drove off, he watched in his rearview mirror the first traces of smoke appearing above his property. He smiled.

He drove back through the town, arrived home. When he stepped out of his car he noticed that the air was much colder than it had been earlier. The leaves looked as though they were being blown back into his yard now and not out of it. After he glanced at the sky again and saw that the clouds were still rolling north, he decided that the leaves were only being whipped up by erratic surface turbulence.

Again, Reginald Frohock smiled.

News item:

SAWYERVILLE, ORE. (AP)—Severe winds here blew down a security spotlight at the Frohock Lumber Co. mill, causing a fire. Fire trucks of the city, nearby mills, and Forest Service fought the blaze for three hours before extinguishing it. Winds from the north blew the flames across the Frohock lumberyard and cold decks, destroying an estimated \$200,000 worth of lumber and logs. This inventory was not insured. Fire officials say that the cold front from the north sliding under the warm southern storm that wreaked havoc throughout the state arrived just as the blaze began and thereby saved the mill itself by placing it upwind instead of downwind. The sawmill experienced no damage.

SMOOTH AWAY YOUR DEBTS

by
**Jeffry
Scott**

Tony Smooth, lateral thinker, hadn't seen Gorgeous Hyphens in years. She was part of his disreputable past—before it turned down-right disgraceful.

Her real name wasn't Gorgeous Hyphens, of course. She was Georgiana Victoria Louise, followed by a clutch of ancient family names he could never remember, all linked by those little dashes signalling class or snobbery and frequently both.

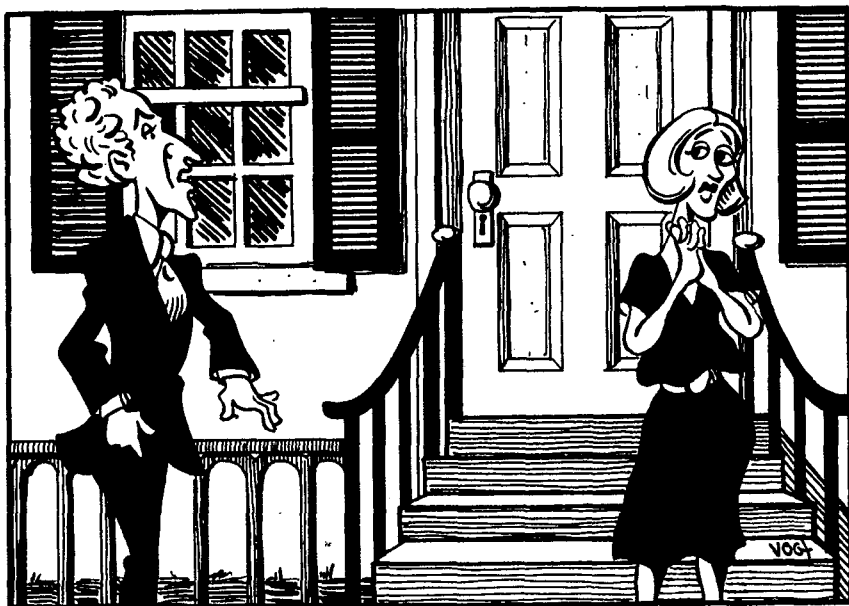


Illustration by Elaine Vogt

She had great legs.

He found her waiting on the doorstep of his Belgravia mews cottage. (Well, not *his* exactly nor even approximately. Like so much of Tony Smooth's life-style, that was complicated.) She gave him a start, sitting statue-still and woebegone, tarnished silver hair and the great legs gleaming ghostly through the five A.M. murk.

"Hello stranger," he said easily, as if they'd last met the pre-

vious week. "I've been sitting up with a sick friend. He wasn't sick, a few hours ago, but then we played poker."

Nothing in his expression betrayed the fact that he was talking about himself. His wink was a work of art, forcing her to giggle. "You haven't won three thousand pounds by any chance?" Gorgeous Hyphens asked.

Smooth's heart plunged into his alligator boots. "Not quite,"

he responded carefully. Some con men would sooner be arrested than flat broke, so he still had five bank-fresh ten pound notes in his billfold; but that was it.

Yet he beamed like a millionaire as he swept her inside, giving her a big drink and switching on the electric logs.

Gorgeous, he noted, hadn't changed. Sexily daft as ever, still using a lot of scent and the minimum of clothing. She worried Smooth, all the same. Gor-

hurting is relative. She ought not to need so little—by her standards—so badly. Smooth's ulcer, battle honor of a lifetime's stress, wasn't giving him trouble, but he suspected it would be, very shortly.

"You haven't picked up a nasty little habit, have you? Like, expensive?"

Siamese cat's eyes blinked and then her face cleared. "You mean boring old *drugs*. Darling, I don't even smoke the legal cigarettes.

"I can't slow down," Gorgeous Hyphens wailed. "I've got to get three thousand pounds by the end of the week."

geous Hyphens might not be rich but she had a private income of sorts—the annual interest from money locked away in trust—and she had her modelling and her courier work at the luxury end of the package tours market, and her translating and interpreting sidelines. Men had always been eager to pay for much of her entertainment and nourishment, too.

What with this damned slump and unemployment, a lot of unexpected people were hurting. But for Gorgeous Hyphens' kind,

"No, I've just been too silly for words. Spending next year's money and the year's after that—talk about The Time Machine, H.G. Wells isn't in it, sweetie. Plus the dreaded overdraft and positively abusive weekly letters from the bank. Then this school chum put me on to the credit card wheeze: you buy madly expensive things with plastic and sell them straight away for cash, which postpones the evil day. Only it's more evil than ever now, because the card people are being

abusive as well."

"Slow down," said Smooth. It was a measure of his concern that the hug he gave her, and the kiss on her high cheekbone, were brotherly rather than lecherous.

"I *can't* slow down," Gorgeous Hyphens wailed. "I've got to get three thousand pounds by the end of the week."

"Come on," he soothed, "banks can wait."

Bosom and legs aside, she might have been six years old, preparing to confess a raid on the cookie jar. "It isn't as simple as that."

"God help us, girl," said Tony Smooth, sincerely. "You'd better tell me the rest."

"It isn't a bank that's involved. More a *person*, as it were. You can charm birds out of trees and blood from a stone, Tony—money from thin air should be child's play."

Generally Tony Smooth kidded himself that he was growing distinguished and impressively mature. Now he couldn't duck being old and wary; older, anyway, his vanity amended. "No, my love, not child's play. Preventive detention is the phrase you're groping for. The judge made my blood run cold, last time around. So I'm straight these days."

She stared at him, poppy mouth dropping. "Pretty straight," he mumbled defen-

sively. Then he shrugged and nodded. They went back a long way, and Gorgeous Hyphens had put her neck on the block for him, more than once.

"What's a smashing bird like you doing in a mess like this?" Smooth complained.

She rose abruptly, frowning at her reflection in a window-pane. "How old would you say I am?"

"I dunno, thirtyish at the most. Nobody looks better on a magazine cover, love."

Gorgeous's laugh was brittle. "Add a decadish to thirtyish, darling. And I haven't modelled in years. That's what I like about old friends, they never notice the wrinkles and the sags."

Smooth had catlike emotional reflexes and superb intuition, around women. "A feller," he guessed aloud, "bit younger, bit of a taker."

She spun round, bell of hair swirling with the force of her denial. "It isn't like that! Jim's going to make pots of money once he gets his break."

It never was like that, he mused drearily. The man needed help, spelt m-o-n-e-y, and who more eager to provide it than a woman in love? And she wanted to look her best, buy new clothes, slip him the price of candlelit dinners, under the restaurant tablecloth.

No point in nagging her to

recognize spilt milk, better to pray that it was just milk and not the usual gall and wormwood. "Let's get back to the point—who do you owe?"

Gorgeous Hyphens, back turned, was pleating a drape while visibly nerving herself. "Hammer Steve."

Tony Smooth went speeding over a bump in the road, couch and all—that momentary, sickening illusion of weightlessness and loss of contact. Vaguely he flicked at some tiny creature, fly or ant, crawling on his forehead—and was startled when a fat drop of sweat sailed off his fingertip.

"Hammer Steve," she repeated, and burst into tears.

Smooth wasted several hours asking himself how Gorgeous Hyphens had got mixed up with a psychopath like Steve Hamner.

Now, meeting her boyfriend Jim Kelleigh, he was starting to understand. The gangling, puppyish American was uncannily handsome, hugely amiable, and a dolt. "Georgie borrowed money off Mr. Hamner? Hey, that's kind of abusing his friendship for me," said Kelleigh.

He signed forgivingly. "Still, Tony, she's into material things. Me, I've learned to free myself from monetary considerations."

Smooth wanted to kick him.

Instead, brutally, he said, "She's gone broke to keep you in pocket money, you twit."

Jim Kelleigh frowned, but although he was a head taller than Smooth and in far better shape—besides being twenty years younger—there was no menace in his expression. Eventually he nodded, gentle brown eyes ashamed. "You're right, I hear you."

("Of course I'd heard about Hammer Steve," Gorgeous Hyphens had said, earlier. "But Jim introduced him as Mr. Hamner, and he *looked* quite human and ordinary; I never made the connection.")

"How in the world d'you come to be tied in with that villain?" Smooth wanted to know.

Kelleigh was taken aback. "He's a criminal?"

"Only like the *Titanic's* a wreck, son. Extortion and blackmail are his middle names. Hammer Steve's still got the first quid he stole off a blind beggar, he only lends to make a great big profit. When he doesn't get it, he's been known to hammer six-inch nails through people's kneecaps. Though he can get really sadistic."

Jim Kelleigh went white. "I'll go to him right now," he said.

"No, you won't, you'll act like everything's fine. I'm acting for the pair of you babes in the wood in this." Tony Smooth lit

a cheroot, coughing irritably. "And you haven't answered the question."

"He's helping us, man." Kelleigh gestured around the depressing Edwardian cellar in which they were standing. Though called the Outermost Theater it still looked like an Edwardian cellar—perhaps because it was—holding fifty or so folding chairs, a few matching, hardly any undamaged. Daylight, even filtered through thick glass gratings in the sidewalk above, wasn't kind to the place, which needed all the help it could get.

At the far end, incongruous, stood something like a giant sentry box in yellow, heavy-duty plastic. It was the sort of thing taken to construction sites on the back of a truck, for sheltering timekeeper or watchman.

Two workmanlike locks had been added to the door.

"Mr. Hamner's interested in our drama group," Jim Kelleigh explained. Nettled by Smooth's snort, he went on, "We're breaking new ground, getting a lot of favorable feedback from the underground media, anyway."

Head on one side, eyes narrowed, Smooth was foxier than usual. "I bet. Hammer Steve can make out numbers on banknotes but he has trouble with joined-up writing; he's

hardly your cultured patron of the arts."

"Well, he saw our improvisational experiments, three nights running, and then insisted on paying the difference between what we take in at the door and what we need. He's really involving himself."

"I bet," Smooth repeated sardonically.

The young American was thinking back. "We had a party here for the fiftieth performance, that's when Mr. Hamner met Georgie. I can't believe he loaned her any bread. I'm not into your British accents, Tony, but anyone can tell Georgie's a class act. And Hamner has kind of a down on . . . uh, toffs and snobs, I believe he characterized them."

The con man smiled pityingly. "That's just why he did it. Either he gets three thousand quid back for two thousand, or he can take it out on her hide. He'd probably like that better. Cheap at twice the price, and he can afford it."

Kelleigh was unconvinced. "That's crazy, I'll just go to the cops."

"Grow up, son. This may not be Yankeeland, but it's still a tough old country, when you lift the flat stones. Yes, you could ask for police protection. You might even get it for a week. Hammer Steve's got the rest of her life. If the law warns him

off, he'll deny all knowledge and just give it an extra year before he slings acid in her face."

Smooth had started prowling the cellar theater. "What's this sentry-box thing?"

"Mr. Hamner's storing it here. He's opening a club nearby, he asked to leave some material here for a few weeks," young Kelleigh explained. "It's a real eyesore, but with him bank-rolling us, we couldn't refuse."

Hands deep in pockets, Smooth didn't hide his fox's-mask grin. "How do you tell one eyesore from the rest in this gaff, son?"

Kelleigh flushed and shrugged. "It may not be much, but it's cheap."

"Yes, I bet they don't pay you much to use it." The actor looked so crestfallen that Smooth patted his shoulder. "Only winding you up, it helps me let off steam when I'm working. You wait for Gorgeous, I want a walk and a think."

Tony Smooth inhaled for a count of eight, held it for the same period, exhaled equally slowly, as the yoga manual recommends for tranquility. All it did was make him giddy enough to grab at a sooty lime tree for support.

London is a hotchpotch of rich and poor, noble architecture and sorry concrete boxes,

often cheek by jowl in the same street. Paragon Crescent reminded him of that lucky dip element.

The Georgian mansion of which the Outermost Theater was the basement had lost two stories in the 1940's air raids. What remained had been turned into offices for a private security organization that provided unarmed guards for public events, hired out night watchmen, and the like.

Next door, to the left, was a small house built at the turn of the century, with a shell porch and iron railings and balconies. It was beautifully kept up yet somehow repressive, with its glossy, sober paintwork and uninformative columns of windows, drapes drawn across, flanking a front door that seemed dedicated to staying shut.

Smooth smiled slowly, nostalgically. He'd entertained a lot of clients—all right, marks—at that house. Stand-offish looking it might be, and you could ring or knock for minutes at a time without response, but it could be a very entertaining place. Not to mention wicked.

Dismissing this unseemly reverie, he let go of the tree and went a few paces along the Crescent, inspecting the house to the right of the Outermost's parent building.

This was a Victorian merchant's palace from the days when the new rich wanted to see Hyde Park. Recently, the windows had been reduced to dark-glass slits. A brace of whale-backed limousines with diplomatic plates were firmly parked on the double yellow lines that forbade parking, and a constable stood guard at the bottom of the broad, shallow steps.

Smooth stared at the sign on the gatepost:

EMBASSY OF THE DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC
OF
KHARKHAQ

A con man can never know too much, however out of the way or trivial. "Where the heck's Car-quack?" Smooth wondered aloud.

The PC was a chatty fellow. "Spring up in the night, these new places, like toadstools," he agreed sympathetically. "When we were at school, if you opened the atlas and put your finger on Aden and moved it a half-inch or so, that'd be Kharkhaq."

Three men, two in flowing robes, one wearing European dress, hurried out past the fat pillars of the portico and dived into a limousine.

"A-rabs," said the policeman, needlessly. "Ought to be run in, the pack of them."

Smooth squinted along his cheroot. "Not their fault they've

got all the money in the world." He liked Arabs. A lot of them hated him. That was because he had ripped them off; hence his affection.

"I don't mind that," the constable grumbled, "good luck to them. But this lot, they're evil. Didn't you see the papers last Sunday, how they're financing half the terrorists in London? And talk about bad tempered, mean-spirited, nasty beggars . . . I hear 'em slagging each other off, sometimes. And fights. The commercial attaché came out, t'other morning, with a lovely black eye *and* half his ear bitten off."

"Bless my soul," Smooth mumbled. A taxi had just pulled up outside the Outermost, and Gorgeous Hyphens was alighting.

Jim Kelleigh bounded up the steps from the basement, sweeping her off her feet. "Honey, I won't let them get you. We'll run for it, I'll take you back home. Maybe my folks have changed their minds about me by now."

Gorgeous said: "Fiddlesticks! I can't run away, I'm *English*, I *live* here." Smiling to take the sting from her crossness, she added, "Darling Tony will fix everything."

Strolling back in time to hear that, Smooth nodded cheerily. "Four days until the end of the week, plenty can happen." All

of it bad. Flinching at the voice of reason, he wished he had the ghost of an idea.

But after all, he was a lateral thinker—if you don't like the answer, change the question. And there was raw material here. Hammer Steve was no patron of the arts. The gangster had muscled in on the Outermost Theater group for some good (which was to say, thoroughly bad) reason. Start from there . . .

Something was jogging his

was only slightly deceptive. He was a burglar.

"Ask me how I am," he greeted Smooth. "I'm terrible. If you want a job doing, I can't oblige. Rheumatics, all those years of climbing about in all winds and weathers. Can't lift my arm higher than this."

Gesturing illustratively, he froze in a modified Statue of Liberty pose. "Now look what you've done!"

"Sorry," Smooth said meekly, but he winked at the boy sitting

Nephew spoke dreamily. "Know the fee we agreed? It just doubled. That was Hammer Steve."

mental elbow, asking to be noticed. "D'you speak Arabic?" he asked Gorgeous. He wasn't surprised when she nodded, for Gorgeous Hyphens picked up languages the way some women collect hats or bangles.

"Good show, my love. I'm off to see a friend at Tooting Bec."

Mr. Neddle, sitting in his homely workshop, was the picture of a traditional craftsman: elderly, wise, steady. His aura

on Neddle's bench, swinging his jeaned legs and looking bored. It must be halfterm vacation for London schools, Smooth guessed.

Mr. Neddle eased his arm back to waist level. "You'll have to take my nephew, Tone, I've learned him the business."

"Bit small, isn't he?"

There was a silence none the less awkward for being brief. The schoolboy ended it by pulling a charred briar pipe from his windcheater pocket and

lighting it before sliding off the bench. "I'm not small, I'm stunted," he announced sulkily. "A not uncommon glandular defect. I'm also an honors graduate in mechanical engineering, and twenty-five years old."

Nephew noted Smooth's loss of poise, and smiled sweetly. "Understandable error. Any further references to my stature, and I'll take a swing at you that'll shatter your shin, so be told."

Smooth said, "It'll be tonight, with kid gloves. I can borrow a key to the place, but what we want opened has to look pristine afterwards. It's one of those portable site-office affairs, only small, not much bigger than a phone box."

Opening and shutting drawers in a filing cabinet behind the lathe, Nephew came up with a sheaf of brochures. "Is it among this lot?"

Smooth soon spotted the box left at the Outermost. "That's what I call efficiency," he marvelled.

"It's what I call common sense," Nephew retorted, poring over specifications in the brochure. "Pick me up at midnight, corner of this street. Don't keep me waiting, Mr. Smooth—people see me on the street late at night, they try to march me home to my mum, and bed."

"I could do with less activity up above," Nephew muttered. They were sitting in a car Smooth had borrowed, opposite the Outermost building. Lights showed in the offices: evidently the security firm's watchmen phoned in regularly to a master controller there, and several had called in the past hour, perhaps to pick up fresh assignments.

"We'll be down those steps and inside like a dose of salts," Smooth consoled him, grasping the door handle.

"Sit tight," Nephew commanded. "Ford Cortina, two vehicles down from that old blue van—it doesn't belong to any of the houses in the Crescent. Could be somebody still in the theater." He chuckled at Smooth's expression. "Oh, I've been here, on and off, all afternoon and evening. I like to check a place out thoroughly . . . and nobody cares about a kid."

Suddenly he and Smooth slid down in their seats. Or rather Smooth did, while Nephew simply stopped standing up.

The men had materialized from nowhere, meaning that they must have come up the steps from the Outermost. They got into the Cortina. Two were nondescript but the third had presence—a hulking, leonine figure maned in white hair and

slabbed with muscle.

Watching the twin rubies of the car's rear lights dwindle, Nephew spoke dreamily. "Know the fee we agreed? It just doubled, and doing it at all is against my better judgment. That was Hammer Steve."

"Deal," Smooth agreed laconically.

Half an hour later, assured that Hammer Steve and his team weren't just driving around the block or fetching coffee, Nephew and Steve were contemplating the yellow cubicle beside the Outermost's apology for a stage.

"I suppose we could just get it over on its side," Smooth suggested doubtfully.

Nephew shook his head. "Didn't you look at those specifications I showed you? These things are meant to sit on building sites and oil rigs — weatherproof, the floor's solid. Lay it on its side, and you just have a horizontal box instead of a vertical one. Boost me up to the roof."

Smooth coughed to cover mirth. Nephew looked like a decoration atop an especially garish cake, poised on the box's roof. "Catch," said Nephew.

Taking the plug, Smooth found a power socket and the small person's drill began whining. Then he was busy with an electric saw. Soon he passed down a two foot square

section of roof. "I can fix this back afterwards, they'll never ..."

Nephew, head and shoulders inside the hatch he had carved, pulled out suddenly. "Fetch a chair and take a look at this," he finished, in a very different tone.

Tony Smooth peered in, and cursed.

The torch beam showed a sawed-off shotgun braced against the cubicle's rear wall. A wire ran down through little pulleys, from the trigger to the inside of the door.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Nephew observed with relish.

"Plain murder, you mean. That's a bit under the arm, even for Hammer Steve."

Nephew snorted disagreement. "It's not aimed at the door. Crude but effective destruct mechanism—see that sinister little box between the tape recorders?"

The cubicle was crammed with tape decks and electronic gear. "When you're in the know, you open that door just far enough to disconnect the trigger wire, it's slack enough for that. If you're not, you open the door and all the evidence goes up with a bang."

Tony Smooth produced his silver hip flask. Nephew pushed the offer away. "Not while I'm driving, thanks. This is command center for a bugging op-

eration. Whoops, there goes a spool, see it turning? Sound-actuated switch, to save tape."

Smooth stepped down from the chair. "Seal it up, like a good lad. I want to have a little think."

Soiled matting covered the stone floor in the area where the box stood. He managed to pull up a loose edge, to see wires heading from the box, through holes drilled in that weather-proof floor, towards the basement's side wall.

"Security firm upstairs, must have a few secrets worth learning," Nephew suggested, running adhesive round the edges of the hatch.

"No, Hamner's a black-mailer. Loan shark on the side, but extortion's his thing." Tony Smooth was abstracted. He helped Nephew clamber down. "Could you rig more wires, leading to holes in the wall over there, opposite direction to these ones?"

"Not tonight, and that'll be another fee," Nephew replied decidedly. "Long job—you're talking yards of wire, and masonry drilling."

"Fair enough; the Good Book says the laborer's worthy of his hire. Tomorrow morning, first thing—Hammer Steve's lot won't leave their beds too early, and the same goes for those theater twits. You'll have to wait for the cash, mind—but

ask your uncle, I'm good for it."

"I did, that's why I'm here. And I'll sample your flask now." Nephew toasted his employer.

"Tricky job," Smooth warned.

"Hammer Steve mustn't notice . . . can you run wires under the mats there, feed 'em into the box through holes that don't show? You needn't drill right through the basement wall. Just enough to make it look like they're setting up to bug the houses *both* sides of this one."

Nephew's eyes sparkled. "Like it. Devious. Tell you what, I'll drill the wall right beside the stage. Cut a panel out of the side of the stage, hide some gear away under there . . . few bits and pieces, like they're stored ready for when the wall's fully pierced. Then I'll put the panel back with just a hairline of cut still showing."

"What a bright chap you are," Smooth chortled. Just in time, he stopped himself patting Nephew on the head.

The woman had the coldest, most measuring eyes Smooth had seen in a long while. Since he'd last met her, in fact. "If this is a scam, I'll take action that will astonish you," she promised.

She didn't waste time talking with fools, so she did not stress the threat by indicating the young man standing in a corner

of her sitting room. He wore a Parachute Regiment tie and would have looked at home in the boardroom of a merchant bank. As an ex-officer he was, by England's imperial yardstick, a gentleman. He was also the highest paid bouncer cum troubleshooter in London.

"No scam," Smooth said fervently. "Have I ever been out of order with you, duchess?"

"With a con man, that's no guarantee."

He watched her pouring afternoon tea. The cups were Rockingham, exquisite as their owner but immeasurably more fragile, for she only looked like bone china.

"I promise you, duchess, Hammer Steve is bugging your place. So far, he can't have got anything worth using, else he'd have started putting the screws on, and you'd know about it."

"It's possible," she commented coolly, but the fresh tension was perceptible. "He could get rich out of my clientele; in power and immunity as much as money, they tend to be influential people."

Smooth nodded understandingly. "By tomorrow, it'll all be over. No fuss, no scandal—well, nothing that leads back to you or yours, duchess. If you want to show appreciation in cash, I'm not a proud man."

She put the cup and saucer to one side, the better to con-

centrate on him. A full minute passed. Then she said: "You're a ruthless little rogue, Smooth, when the pressure is on. I'd like Hammer Steve discouraged. Do you understand?"

Parachute Regiment escorted him out, wordlessly though courteously. Once past that staunchly uninformative, uninviting front door, it was a strange house. Elegant, spick and span, with the curiously airless feel of a soundproofed structure. Every corridor was partitioned down the middle—a number of people could be moved around from room to room, floor to floor, without catching sight of each other.

A lot of traditionally designed brothels are arranged on that system. The duchess had one of the most expensive, discreet, and exclusive establishments in Europe.

Smooth checked his watch. "Right, it's late, Jim and his mates have left the theater, nobody has any right to be there. So if things get naughty in the next hour or two, that's their lookout."

He tapped the latest Diplomatic List, already open at the page giving details of staff at the Kharkhaq embassy.

"That's the feller you ask for, tell 'em to get him out of bed if needs be."

Gorgeous Hyphens, lips mov-

ing silently, was studying the page of typescript Smooth had prepared.

"Remember," he instructed, "you're one of his lot, but you've been living among the infidels since you were knee-high. You're terrified of Hammer Steve, but your heart's in the right place, you've got to warn the Old Country."

"Last night, Hammer Steve rang the call-girl service and they sent you along. You had to wait in his flat, you heard him having this terrible row with some of his boys, in the next room. Hammer Steve was mad because he'd told them to bug the embassy so he could sell what he got to the highest bidder, but they'd wasted days penetrating the house next door, a private home. Hammer Steve told them to get the Kharkhaq premises bugged within forty-eight hours, else it'd be nail-through-the-patella time, all round. You think your countrymen ought to know."

A hand on the phone, Gorgeous Hyphens asked, "Tony, how is this going to get my three thousand pounds? If you stir up trouble for that monster, he'll be in an even worse temper. And I'm supposed to pay up, the day after tomorrow."

Smooth took the receiver, dialled the number, passed it to her. "Just make the call, my love."

Gorgeous Hyphens, snivelling convincingly, shrieking at times, released a torrent of what sounded to him like gibberish, full of glottal clicks and nasal flutings. "Now what?" she demanded, when she had hung up.

"Now you run home to darling Jim. The rest is as Allah wills it," Smooth answered, loftily.

The money on the icy-eyed old woman's Regency side table was fractionally closer to Smooth's side, as he sat down.

Sipping her tea with far more relish than it deserved, she said, "These abuses of diplomatic immunity are the limit. Hammer Steve run down in broad daylight, and the embassy driver's on his way home to the Middle East before the blood's dry."

Her grin was worse than her eyes. "And his flat's been taken apart, not to mention his offices. A catalogue of disasters! Eminently satisfactory."

The grin vanished. "We've found three microphones, incredibly powerful my tame expert says, embedded in ground floor walls. If those Arabs hadn't taken it into their heads to put Hamner away, then I would have."

Smooth did not share her mood of victory. He had ex-

pected Hammer Steve to be run out of town and kept busy for months, until a safe way of raising the money could be devised.

Then again, Hammer Steve was an unpunished murderer several times over, some crimes stretching back to the era of capital punishment.

He shrugged mentally, deciding that it was another moral and ethical blot on a scroll that would resemble a leopardskin print by the time he went to final judgment.

Lateral thinking: if you can't pay a debt, give the man to whom it is owed something else to worry about. Well, you could say that. Steve Hamner was gone, his records were ashes, and his gang was a terrified rabble of fugitives interested only in never hearing the name of London again.

And Gorgeous Hyphens was off the hook. Tony Smooth took the solid, faintly greasy-smelling chunk of ten pound notes. "Pleasure doing business with you, duchess."

She made him wince as he went out. "Don't ever get angry with *me*, Smooth. I want to live to be a hundred. One gets a congratulatory telegram from the Queen."

He stayed away from Gor-

geous Hyphens and her Jim for several months thereafter. He sensed that they would not want to be reminded of his solution to her problem.

But he ran into her at Ascot, looking rosy and a touch ungainly. "Tony! Guess what, I'm preggers . . . the doctor says I'm incredibly old and only just squeezed under the wire, but I'm also strong as *three* horses, so it'll all be super. I'm so thrilled."

"Great. So you married Jim."

She was slightly taken aback. "Oh, yes, I expect we'll do that, too, one day. At least he's met Daddy and they *get on* . . . after a fashion. I'm hoping Daddy will settle my overdraft and so forth, once he's a grampa."

Gorgeous Hyphens bit her lip. "That other thing . . . I'd never have *killed* that monster. Not for a million. You were *dishonest*."

Words failed him, a rare thing for Tony Smooth. And then, seeing the logic and sincerity behind her reproach, and responding to her zany good-heartedness, he nodded ruefully.

"Sweetheart, sweetheart, I'm honest as the day is long, *me*. Was it my fault, being put in a world where nasty folk make the nights last half a year?"

C IS FOR COOKIE

by
T. Robin
Kantner



Illustration by Arthur George

"No" isn't a word I like to say to pretty women. But I'd said it to Charlotte Ambrose, in no uncertain terms, when she disappeared from the restaurant, leaving me stuck with her screaming two-year-old charge.

I hadn't wanted to meet her in the first place. Charlotte and

I were an old deal, long dead and a bitter memory. But in that excited, rich-broad, enthusiastic way of hers, she'd persuaded me on the phone to meet her at Mr. Mike's in Westland to talk over an "assignment." There was money in it for me, she said. That tipped the scales in favor of going, if only barely.

It had been twelve years so she looked older, but she was still the white-blonde, creamy Nordic, limber, and sensual Charlotte that I remembered. And the money she offered was my usual rate—two fifty per day plus expenses. But the job was crap, a locate job on a boyfriend of hers who'd disappeared. I turned her down without a second thought, partly because I didn't like the sound of the job and partly for the satisfaction of saying no to her just once and, in that small, petty way, getting back at her for what she'd done to me years before. And then, without the slightest warning, she excused herself to go to the restroom and just plain dropped out of sight.

I didn't realize it at first, of course. I finished my beer and smoked a cigar and stared absently around the restaurant at the handful of people there. Then the kid, a chubby little blue-eyed boy named Will, commenced to screaming. I fidgeted, offering him crackers to

eat and utensils to play with, but he sent up a howl to the ceiling, his plump face red like a balloon. Charlotte's pit stop stretched abnormally long, and I finally sent a waitress to check up on her. Gone, she said. Not in the parking lot, either. Leaving me alone with the brat.

I know she's a bitch," Kate said, "but why would she abandon her kid? With you?"

We were in my apartment in Belleville and the kid was clinging to my leg, staring at Kate. He'd stopped hollering about halfway back from Mr. Mike's and was doing the shy wide-eyed bit, occasionally issuing a hiccup. Kate was staying with me for a few days because her ex-husband, whose name is, apparently, That Jerk, was conducting his semi-annual harassment campaign against her and she needed a place to hide out. I said, "The kid's not hers. She told me she was babysitting him for a friend who was away for a few days."

Kate was a short shaggy off-blonde, painfully thin and gaunt, and she wore her usual expression of half skepticism and half harried patience. "You know, in the six years we've been involved, I've seen you get people shot in my house, and I've seen you rough up deputy sheriffs, and I've seen you take

some of the sleaziest characters in the world out for dinner. But I never imagined you'd bring home an abandoned toddler."

"That's why you should stick around, kid. Officially I may be just an apartment maintenance guy, but there's always more to Perkins than that." I disengaged Will from my leg and headed into the kitchen to build a drink and figure out what to do. Kate went over to the kid. "Are you hungry, Will?"

"Ha," he said seriously, his face still flushed.

To Kate's arched eyebrow I interpreted, having picked up a little of the kid's jargon, "Yes."

"See cookie," Will added.

"I'll check," she answered. As she pawed through the cupboards, I poured myself some straight Jack Daniel's. Groping among the boxes, wrappers, and debris, she said, "I take it you turned her down."

"I did."

She found a bag of stale Oreos and handed one to the boy, who practically inhaled it, looking hopefully and much more happily at Kate. "What was the job?"

"Some boyfriend of hers disappeared. She wanted him found. I wasn't up for it."

"Sure, Ben. But now you're stuck with the kid. What do you plan to do about that?"

Will had found the bathroom and I heard the toilet flush.

Thank God—a good, disciplined, toilet-trained little kid. He came out of the bathroom sans jeans and trailing a long stream of toilet paper. As Kate and I both dived to gather it up, I said, "She's just peevisish. Sooner or later she'll call me and tell me who the kid's mother is. Or, even better, I'll call her." I left Kate to pull the kid's pants back on, shoved the bundle of toilet paper into the wastebasket, and went to the phone where I found taped to it a slip with a telephone number.

"The Kroger's store in Belleville called," Kate said from behind me. "Apparently the check you passed there bounced."

"I didn't *pass* a check, I *gave* them one. And if it bounced, it's probably some screwup." At least I hoped so, since my checking account seemed to have a mind of its own. I reached for the phone and it rang as my hand touched the receiver.

"Enjoying the babysitting?" Charlotte asked sweetly.

I sighed. "Nice gag, Charlotte."

Kate leaned her bluejeaned fanny against the edge of the counter, listening. The boy was studiously opening and closing cupboard doors but apparently was well brought up enough not to mess with anything inside. In my ear, Charlotte laughed and said, "I *do* rather fancy the idea of your taking care of a lit-

tle baby boy, but I must confess that humor wasn't my only motive."

Charlotte never did anything that didn't redound to her advantage. "So fill me in," I said evenly.

"You do the job, Ben," she said. "Find Chuck Crane for me. And then I'll tell you where the kid belongs. Don't worry, nobody's looking for him right now. You've got enough time, if you're at all as talented at your work as I'm told you are. And I'll pay you as agreed."

The boy, having decided I was okay, I guess, was giving me a sunny, radiant look, which was about all I needed just then.

I said, "This is one sick, twisted game you're playing, Charlotte."

"But effective. And don't think about trying to track me down. I'm where you could never, ever find me. You'll never find the boy's mother, either. When you have the answer, call my home number and leave word on my message box. Within four hours I'll call you back and we'll meet someplace. Do it fast, Ben." She hung up.

I slammed the phone down and banged my fist against the wall, which got me nothing but sore knuckles. Kate looked more gaunt than usual. I told her the story and she said immediately,

"So turn the kid over to the cops. Simple enough."

I sat down on a chair and lighted a small cork-tipped cigar. After a long pause I said, "Nope. Not right now, anyway."

"Why, for God's sake?"

"Because," I said without looking at her, "I take care of things myself. I don't dump them off on someone else. You know that."

"So you're going to let that ruthless swine strong-arm you," she jibed.

The boy stood between us, eyes wide, not understanding the words but picking up on the tone, for sure. "I can't win every point, Kate."

"Yeah," she said grimly, pushing herself away from the counter and going to the sink. She made herself speciously busy with some dishes. "You just want to do it. This is just a convenient excuse to get involved with her again. You just don't learn, do you."

It was a dumb argument and one I'd run out of patience with. Getting to my feet, I said, "You got a choice. Come with me while I try to get a line on this Crane fella, or sit here and sulk."

"I'll stay here, thanks," she said. "The boy's had enough moving around for one day. You go and help your girlfriend."

Kate could sure turn on a person, I reflected as I headed out I-94 in my '71 Mustang. It had been getting worse lately, worse than ever. After six years, it was finally going sour. I knew it and she knew it; what we hadn't got around to yet was what Bob Seger calls "the famous final scene."

She came close to starting one with that girlfriend crack, though—as if I wanted to do the job, as if Charlotte meant anything to me any more. Fact was, I was feeling nothing but cold burning fury at what she'd done, exploiting a helpless two-year-old and the boy's unknowing family. But it was like her.

We'd met in the mid-sixties under the most clichéd of circumstances: her mother and my mom fixed us up. The two women couldn't have been more different. Charlotte's mother was your typical Franklin Village matron, and my mom was a nursing home supervisor who boarded kids for rich folks to make a few extra bucks. (Side-lines, you see, are an old Perkins family tradition, though my mom's moonlighting was far more respectable than mine.)

One of my mom's boarders—and a real brat as I recall—was Charlotte's younger brother. My mom thought it would be good for me to find a

"nice girl" from a "good family" and settle down. And forget the questionable job I had as aide to a union boss with a smudged reputation. What Charlotte's mother thought isn't on the record, although I suspect she welcomed the suit of a no-frills straight arrow like me after seeing a steady parade of giggle-headed rich kids march through Charlotte's life. Shy Charlotte wasn't.

It started for laughs and got heavy quick, quicker than either of us expected. Unlike most of the women I'd known until then, Charlotte was dynamic. Her considerable physical attributes aside, she was bright, enthusiastic, challenging, tough-minded, and exciting. Her bright light burned white hot, attracting people to her; and sometimes I'd sit and wonder what she saw in me, a straight, sober, hard-edged Detroit boy on the make.

We got ourselves a house in the Jefferson-Chalmers neighborhood. It was one of the older ones, a rambling yellow brick place on the Detroit River with its own boathouse. My job was increasingly intense and dangerous, and Charlotte was meteoric and unpredictable and not the easiest person in the world to live with, and yet, all these years later, I remember those days as being tranquil. I

remember barbecue dinners out on the big airy porch; long walks along the river; card games and beer of an evening with one or two of the young couples who lived around us; evenings spent in debate; sunrise strolls around the Belle Isle fountain; afternoons making love in the enormous second-story riverfront bedroom while the curtains floated in the air and freighters glided by outside in ghastly silence.

The riot in 1967 changed things for keeps. My mom's nursing home got torched and she died on the second day, trying to get an inmate out. The feds came after my boss and some others on tax and racketeering charges and they zeroed in on me, trying to make me Public Snitch Number One. I refused to talk, even though they gave me immunity; my name got in the papers; and one day, when it looked as if I was going to jail on contempt charges, I came home to find Charlotte gone. Not a word. Just empty closets and her car gone from the garage.

Things bottomed out then, thank God. The feds made their case via the net worth method, the defendants went off to Lewisburg, and I went off the hook. A lot of years passed and I never heard of Charlotte again—and thought of her as little as possible, which is to say

once a day.

But I didn't rehash ancient history on my way to Southfield. Instead, I tried to piece together what I'd half-heard from Charlotte as she told me about her mysterious Chuck Crane. A thin, wiry, athletic man, she said, in his mid-thirties. She'd met him on St. Patrick's Day at one of the Irish bars on the west side. He lived in the Franklin Park Towers and drove a Corvette. He had lots of clothes, manners, style, money, and smarts, and he never seemed to work. He called himself an "investor." He and Charlotte made several long trips together, one to Switzerland, one to the Bahamas, and she introduced him to her daddy, whom I once sarcastically referred to as the "oil seal king." By Charlotte's standards the affair was serious.

Until he disappeared a month ago.

The Franklin Park Towers sprawls at the intersection where the Lodge Freeway dumps out onto I-696 heading west and Telegraph Road shoots north toward Pontiac. There's a lot of government land there, including a couple of military reserve outfits and an old Nike missile base; there are also shopping centers, synagogues, and endless miles of well-heeled subdivisions with names like Bingham Farms, Mayfair, and

Beverly Hills. I've often thought of it as the place where Detroit busted open and gushed people north.

The apartments are huge and glum looking, the style known as Twentieth Century Insane Asylum. Pretty they aren't, but they happen to be one of the prestige addresses of the Detroit area. I found Crane's apartment and, with the timely help of a skeleton key I'd acquired at great cost some years before (its previous owner is now a guest of the state at Marquette), gained entry.

It was a single bedroom place, conspicuously neat and sterile; rented furniture, nothing personal on the walls, none of the little debris of personality in the place at all. I had the bizarre feeling that I'd broken by accident into the complex's model apartment—a place everyone looked at but no one lived in—not a place where a wealthy young man had lived for several years. Judging from the dry sink, the painstaking orderliness of the silverware and plates, the clean dry tub and the absence of dirty linen, it looked to me as if no one had lived there for a month or more, maybe. There was also a feeling of emptiness. Like a personality had been there once but had left for good.

The resident rental agent wasn't much help. He had, after

all, a huge number of tenants to keep track of, and he didn't know any of them personally, let alone Chuck Crane. I also don't think he was overly impressed with my cover story that I was an investigator for Mass Mutual Insurance. He glumly went through his records anyway, giving me beady little hostile looks. Yes, Crane had rented the apartment. He'd paid his rent a year in advance (and the thought occurred to me: who in his right mind does *that?*). No, there were never any complaints about him. Where Crane worked was not the agent's business. The only concrete thing I could get out of him was Crane's license plate number. A thin, very frail thread, but the best I could do.

I headed south on Telegraph to the huge, cylindrical Holiday Inn, went inside to a bank of phones, and called a friend in Lansing. She's a financial analyst for the state of Michigan, and a damned good one, and she has that invaluable resource for a fellow in my line of work, direct and unlimited access to the state's computer records. She even carries a portable terminal home, which was where I found her. I think helping me is a kick for her, even though she fusses a lot about my occasional requests. I help her out with things from time to time, and buy her lunch in Detroit

once a month, so it evens out. Sort of.

She put me on hold and was gone quite a while firing up her terminal and going into the computer on her second telephone line. She came back to tell me that Crane's car was registered to a firm called Pan Peninsular Products—such a Michigan kind of name I was surprised they didn't throw a "Wolverine" in—based in the Penobscot Building in Detroit. I asked, in passing, for a run-down on the company and she said it would take some time and she'd get back to me on it later that night.

It was pushing late afternoon by then, but I headed straight down to the Penobscot. It was tired looking and half empty, like many downtown office buildings since the Renaissance Center went up a few years back. Pan Peninsular occupied a suite on the tenth floor. I stood in the echoing hallway and did my magic act with a skeleton key again. I found the suite stripped clean—nothing left but the stink of cigarettes, a couple of rickety, ready-for-junkyard desks, and severed coils of telephone cables. Pan Peninsular no longer existed, as far as I could tell, except for the name neatly stenciled on the rippled glass door.

The TV flickered color into the otherwise dark living room of my apartment as I entered. In the strange strobe-like light, Kate's gaunt face looked stark and stony. She turned to me as I closed the door and said without greeting, "Garden City Medical Center called while you were gone. That check you sent them on your Uncle Dan's account bounced."

I went purposefully into the kitchen, poured myself a big shot of Jack Daniel's black, and rescued a bottle of Stroh's from the refrigerator. Back in the living room I saw that Kate wasn't drinking—a bad sign. I said, "Where's the boy?"

"Sleeping in your bed. He fell asleep about eight, after wiping out your Oreo supply, two hot dogs, and an entire can of pork and beans. God, if my kids had eaten like that . . . What's with your checking account lately, anyway? You underfinanced, or something?"

"Nah, that's not it," I said absently. I sat down at the other end of the couch from her and noted that she made no move to slide down and join me. In a feeble attempt to get past our awkwardness, I told her what I'd found out—which amounted to a big fat zero. I finished, "So Crane's a big phony. The only question is, what was

his game and where did he go? Hopefully Lansing will get me some information tonight. Maybe I'll get it ironed out and get the kid back home tomorrow."

"And if not you can call the cops," she said flatly.

I got the telephone off the hi-fi cabinet, sat on the couch, shucked my shoes, and dialed Lansing. My friend picked the phone up before the second ring.

"Pan Peninsular's a shell, Ben," she told me.

"What do you mean?"

"It's hollow. Business license and incorporation papers only. No assets, no taxes, the officers are professional front guys. The outfit, as far as the State of Michigan is concerned, is a company in name only."

"Okay, kid, do me some blue-sky. In your experience, what does this mean?"

There was a brief hissing of long-distance silence and then she said, "All right, but this is off the record."

"Always. Always."

"It's one of two things," she said slowly. "Either it's an organization front, for laundering money or something, or . . . just maybe . . . it's a government front, one of those 'sting' operations. I've seen it happen both ways. You get enough official paper to stand a cursory inspection, and go from there."

I got my last cigar out of my shirt pocket and lighted it from a wood match struck against my thumbnail. The smoke showed translucent gray, like a navy ship, in the light of the TV set. "Anything more you can tell me? Who do I talk to now?"

She laughed. "Either the organization or someone in Justice. You know the players better than I do, Ben."

"I hear you. Thanks, kid."

"Listen, for this you owe me London Chop House."

"And here I had a nice A & W Root Beer all picked out for you."

I heard her laugh as I hung up. Kate was watching "The Dukes of Hazzard" and I pondered for a moment. Sure, I knew the players all right, but it had to be approached with great precision. Finally I picked up the phone, searched my memory, and dialed tentatively. My contact wasn't available, which was the routine; I hung up and a few minutes later the phone rang. I snatched it up. My contact was upset, highly upset. He spoke in that business-speak dialect that indicated he was worried about my phone's being tapped, despite the number of years he's known me.

I gave him a few pieces of information, but didn't muscle

him, partly because I've never needed to, and partly because it wouldn't have worked. My strongest selling point was that Pan Peninsular had closed up shop and Crane had disappeared, so it was old business and there was no reason not to give me the story. My contact hemmed and hawed and then certified to me that Chuck Crane was not known among his colleagues, in either the Detroit or Pontiac operations, and that there had been no business involving such a person. I hung up, knowing that the next call would tell the tale.

The "Dukes" were on commercial. Kate stirred and said, "You know, it's a pity."

"What's that, kid?"

"We're alone in the room and you're not even here."

Hell of a time for heavy mysteries. "Look, it's late and I've got a few more calls to make, okay?"

She shrugged. I picked up the phone again and called the highest police authority I knew, Detective Captain Elvin Dance of the Detroit Police Department.

I first got to know Elvin when he was a strike breaker with one of the car companies in the early sixties. Fortunately, he went legit after that and joined the police department and did very well for himself. To no one's surprise. Elvin is a good,

solid, practical cop, half politician and half lawman, a remarkable combination for a man who grew up in a slum and earned his Ph.D. at night at Wayne State. He was on duty, which wasn't unusual, and at his desk, which was.

"Run that by one more time, Ben."

"What I said was," I said distinctly, "you find whoever you have to and tell them I know about Crane and the sting operation he was running. I don't know what his game was and I don't care. All I want to know is where the man is." I felt my heart pounding. "Or I'll go to every media organ in town and turn them loose on it. Confidentiality guaranteed. This is information for a client of mine not involved in the business."

"You know, Ben," he said, his voice a coarse growl, "there's been some heavy federal action round here lately. Mucho sensitive. How much of that big nose of yours you want whacked off? I'm just asking, as a friend of yours."

I said, "You get the word out now. I want a call back from a top player tonight. That happens, and nothing further gets said to anybody."

He sighed, "I'll look into it, man."

The Duke boys were headed toward their showdown with the Boss, and I didn't feel wel-

come to interrupt. Instead I morosely smoked my cigar, thinking about the downside: red lights in the parking lot, handcuffs on the wrists, the fast hustle to the waiting car, the grim professional faces firing tough professional questions. I'd come close to it before, but usually for better reasons than helping a selfish, strong-willed, adrenalin junkie.

And the phone rang. I picked it up with a slippery hand. It was Bill Scozzafava, the bartender at my local watering hole, Under New Management.

"You ever heard of uttering and publishing, stupid?"

It was his polite and legal way of informing me that one of my Detroit Bank drafts had gone rubber on him. I smoothed him over, promising him cash money the next day. I cut off the conversation as quickly as I could and hung up. I was getting tired and my mind was wandering and it seemed like only moments later when the phone rang again.

The voice was, as might be expected, unknown to me. Anonymous, masculine, bland, purposeful. It said, "You have made inquiries about a man named Crane. You have made certain guarantees. We accept the guarantees because we have the means to enforce them, as you probably recall from your encounter with us in the late

sixties. What you need to know about the story is as follows . . ."

When I hung up, Kate was gone. I found her sleeping with Will in my bed. It was a pretty picture. I went back to the living room and with thick fingers punched out Charlotte's number. Her answering machine gave a perky spiel and when the tone sounded I told her to meet me at the Belle Isle fountain at seven. Good a place as any.

I found a thin summer blanket in my linen closet and wrapped it around me like a shroud and fell into an awkward and restless sleep on the couch.

She wore a white blouse open to the breasts and white deck pants over white sandals, and she sat on the rim of the defunct Belle Isle fountain. A short distance away on the curving drive was a knee-high, stainless steel DeLorean that I assumed was hers. I parked behind it and walked over to her. The sun was rising over Windsor to the south, bathing her white-blond hair and casting ambivalent shadows of darkness and light over the pathetic grandeur of the dry fountain. I sat down a piece away from her and lighted a cigar, filling my rusted mouth and lungs with good coarse smoke.

"You owe me a name."

With an amused and triumphant look, she retorted, "You owe *me* the story."

"Know anybody in cocaine, Charlotte?"

She squinted into the sun and smiled at me, her impossibly white and even teeth glinting in the new sun. "Of course. Doesn't everybody?"

"I'm talking traffic, not the trendy geeks into an occasional party snort."

"You know me," she said smugly. "I only deal with the top people in any field."

"Seen any of them around lately?" I asked wearily.

In the silence she slowly straightened and began, by God, to look a little uncertain. "No, it's gotten pretty quiet. What are you getting at, Ben?"

"Your friend Crane was D. E. A. That's Drug Enforcement Administration, the Justice arm that handles drugs since the F. B. I. has never had jurisdiction in that particular area. Crane's part of a real small, elite group. They're called the Flying Squad. They're moles, Charlotte. They move into an area and live three, four, five years undercover. They work their way into the drug traffic, build the book on the top people in it, turn the case, and disappear. They never even stay around to testify, their work is that thorough. They don't have names. They

don't have real identities or lives. The case is their whole life."

I hadn't noticed it before, but the sharp uncaring sunlight was showing a pattern of lines and creases in her face that weren't there twelve years ago. Apparently the years hadn't been any kinder to her than I was. It occurred to me how vital her flip, arrogant attitude was to her good looks. She said flatly, "So he busted them."

"He's in St. Louis now; burrowing his way in. You'll never see him again. It wasn't real to him, Charlotte, it was just a case and you were part of it."

She stood up angrily. "It was more than that to him. Believe me, I know." She thought of something. "After all, he protected me. He didn't turn me in with the rest."

She was asking for it and I didn't hesitate to give it to her. "You're a dilettante, Charlotte. A thrill-seeking groupie. He's a pro and he sized you up right away. He knew, with your social connections, he could ride you right into the mainstream. But once he had the case nailed down, you were nothing to him any more. He got the principals but didn't bother with you because you were nothing but small fry. And guys like him have no use for small fry."

She smiled, but it was forced, the bright light extinguished.

"You know," she said, cocking her head to one side as she narrowed her eyes, "I had other reasons for wanting to see you. The assignment wasn't the only thing. I did care for you—"

"You didn't care for me. You loved my game. The union, the scandal, the investigation, the notoriety. I finally worked that out for myself, when I was trying to deal with the fact that you ran like a rat when my back was to the wall. You wanted the game but you couldn't take the heat."

"No," she shouted, her face lean and ugly, "I left because you were just what you are now: nothing! Look at you! A maintenance man and . . . and a detective! All you've gotten is older. You haven't gotten anywhere, after all these years, haven't achieved a thing, just another flunky."

"As opposed to you, presumably."

After a long silence, she nodded abruptly and hooked her thumbs in the waistband of her pants. "Well, I got what I wanted." She took a step to go, then hesitated. "I wish I hadn't had to use the kid to muscle you, but the results speak for themselves. His mother will be out at your place this morning to pick Will up. She'll never speak to me again, of course, but that's not a big price to pay."

She turned. "Goodbye, Ben."

"Just a minute," I said roughly, taking her arm. She turned, her blue eyes directed indifferently at me. "You're into this flunky for a day and some gas money. Call it two seventy-five and we're quits."

She smiled contemptuously, went into her purse, and counted out two C-notes and four twenties. I curled them into a stiff tube and stuck them into my shirt pocket, then fished out a crumpled five and gave it to her. Without another word or look, I headed back to my car. She called something that the rising wind muffled. It might have been thanks but, knowing Charlotte, it probably wasn't.

The tension was electric in my kitchen. The boy was hunkered on his knees on one of my chairs at the small dinette, spooning Cheerios sloppily into his mouth. Kate was at the other end of the table, cupping a mug of coffee in her hands. And another woman sat between her and Will, a tall medium blonde with a long voluptuous figure and a Lady Diana haircut. She rose, a worried, uncertain smile on her face, and Kate said to me, "This is Will's mother, Ben. Carole Somers."

Mrs. Somers wore a one-piece denim dress that ended just below her knees, revealing ele-

gant long legs beneath. Her eyes warmed up as she held out her hand and I shook it. "From what Kate's been telling me, Mr. Perkins, I owe you a ton of thanks—and a certain ex-friend a punch in the jaw." Despite the words, her dark brown eyes were merry, her smile as golden as her hair.

"Name's Ben, Carole. No thanks needed. Charlotte mentioned you were an old friend of hers?" I let her hand go, still feeling its warmth in my palm.

The boy was giving me that radiant, adoring look again, and this wasn't lost on Carole, who smiled. "Past tense, for sure. You too?"

"With seniority," I grinned. Kate sat straight-faced, watching me as I poured myself a cup of coffee and leaned back against the counter. "You leave the boy with her often?"

Carole shrugged. "Once in a while, when I have to travel. When I got in at Metro this morning there was a message from her telling me where to pick Will up. I was curious but not alarmed. Not until Kate told me the story." She gave the boy a smile. "You sure took good care of him."

"It was Kate," I admitted.

"No trouble," Kate shrugged.

"See cookie," Will announced.

"We're all out," Kate said.

"This kid and cookies—"

"Oh, that's not what he means," Carole laughed. "He watches 'Sesame Street' and that's a song the Cookie Monster sings. 'C is for Cookie, that's good enough for me.'"

Kate wasn't exactly mirthful that morning, but she laughed with us at that. Carole got up then, gathered up Will, and headed for the door. I followed her and found out as she thanked me effusively that she lived in Berkley and wanted to keep in touch with me. Well, that made two of us.

Back in the kitchen, Kate handed me the phone, which I hadn't heard ring. "Detroit Bank."

The lady was very upset with me. I bank by mail, mainly, and I'd sent in a couple of payroll checks and forgotten to endorse them. They promptly mailed them back for endorsement, but since I'm pretty lazy and don't open my mail more than once a week, I didn't know what had gone wrong until the bank, nervous, began bouncing my checks all over the place. I endured the lecture, promised to stop in and correct the problem, and hung up.

Kate was at the door, lugging her overnight bag. "What do you say?" she asked lightly.

Theoretically, after six years, plenty. But I inquired, "What about That Jerk?"

"He's probably given up by

now. If not I'll run him off. God knows I've done it before." She opened the door and turned to me, at the very edge of her composure. "Isn't it the damndest thing. C is for Cookie. Sometimes we forget." Then she hefted her bag and left quickly.

I shut the door and thought that, if she'd stayed, I'd probably have replied that C also stands for cocaine, checks, conspiracies. But I've found that you usually don't get to say everything you want to during

the famous final scene.

I suppose you could say I netted out on the deal. Kate was gone, but there was Carolé, whom I saw lot of in the time that followed. And I made friends with a damned nice little kid, my first brush with domesticity.

Ironic, I guess.

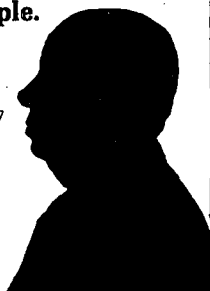
Charlotte wanted something badly but didn't get it. I came into the situation not wanting or expecting anything, but got plenty. And got paid besides.

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CASES ON FILE

The Vanishing Lady

by Alexander Woolcott



NYT Pictures

Then there was the story—told me some years ago as a true copy of a leaf from the dread secret archives of the Paris police—of the woman who disappeared during the World Exposition as suddenly, as completely, and as inexplicably as did Dorothy Arnold ten years later from the sidewalks of New York.

As I first heard the story, it began with the arrival from Marseilles of an Englishwoman and her young, inexperienced daughter, a girl of seventeen or

thereabouts. The mother was the frail, pretty widow of an English officer who had been stationed in India, and the two had just come from Bombay, bound for home. In the knowledge that, after reaching there, she would soon have to cross to Paris to sign some papers affecting her husband's estate, she decided at the last minute to shift her passage to a Marseilles steamer, and, by going direct to Paris, look up lawyers there and finish her business before crossing the Channel to settle for-

Above: Alexander Woolcott. NOTE: There have been several expositions in Paris. The one Mr. Woolcott is referring to here is the World Exposition of 1900. ED.

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ever and a day in the Warwickshire village where she was born.

Paris was so tumultuously crowded for the Exposition that they counted themselves fortunate when the *cocher* deposited them at the Crillon, and they learned that their precautionary telegram from Marseilles had miraculously caught a room on the wing—a double room with a fine, spacious sitting room looking out on the Place de la Concorde. I could wish that they had wired one of those less magnificent caravansaries, if only that I might revel again in such a name as the Hotel of Jacob and of England, or, better still, the Hotel of the Universe and of Portugal. But, as the story reached me, it was to the Crillon that they went.

The long windows of their sitting room gave on a narrow, stone-railed balcony and were half-shrouded in heavy curtains of plum-colored velvet. As again and again the girl later on had occasion to describe the look of that room when first she saw it, the walls were papered in old rose. A high-backed sofa, an oval satinwood table, a mantel with an ormolu clock that had run down—these also she recalled.

The girl was the more relieved that there would be no need of a house-to-house search for rooms, for the mother had

seemed unendurably exhausted from the long train ride, and was now of such a color that the girl's first idea was to call the house physician, hoping fervently that he spoke English, for neither she nor her mother spoke any French at all.

The doctor, when he came—a dusty, smelly little man with a wrinkled face lost in a thicket of whiskers, and a reassuring Legion of Honor ribbon in the buttonhole of his lapel—did speak a little English. After a long, grave look and a few questions put to the tired woman on the bed in the shaded room, he called the girl into the sitting room and told her frankly that her mother's condition was serious; that it was out of the question for them to think of going on to England next day; that on the morrow she might better be moved to a hospital, etc., etc.

All these things he would attend to. In the meantime he wanted the girl to go at once to his home and fetch him a medicine that his wife would give her. It could not be as quickly prepared in any chemist's. Unfortunately, he lived on the other side of Paris and had no telephone, and with all Paris *en fête* it would be perilous to rely on any messenger. Indeed, it would be a saving of time and worry if she could go, armed with a note to his wife he was

even then scribbling in French at a desk in the sitting room. In the lobby below, the manager of the hotel, after an excited colloquy with the doctor, took charge of her most sympathetically, himself putting her into a *sapin* and, as far as she could judge, volubly directing the driver how to reach a certain house in the Rue Val du Grâce, near the Observatoire.

It was then that the girl's agony began, for the ramshackle victoria crawled through the festive streets and, as she afterwards realized, more often than not crawled in the wrong direction. The house in the Rue Val du Grâce seemed to stand at the other end of the world, when the carriage came at last to a halt in front of it. The girl grew old in the time which passed before any answer came to her ring at the bell. The doctor's wife, when finally she appeared, read his note again and again, then with much muttering and rattling of keys stationed the girl in an airless waiting room and left her there so long that she was weeping for very desperation, before the medicine was found, wrapped, and turned over to her.

A hundred times during that wait she rose and started for the door, determined to stay no longer but to run back empty-handed through the streets to her mother's bedside. A thou-

sand times in the wretched weeks that followed she loathed herself for not having obeyed that impulse. But always there was the feeling that having come so far and having waited so long, she must not leave without the medicine just for lack of the strength of will to stick it out a little longer—perhaps only a few minutes longer.

Then the snail's pace trip back to the Right Bank was another nightmare, and it ended only when, at the *cocher's* mulish determination to deliver her to some hotel in the Place Vendôme, she leaped to the street and in sheer terror appealed for help to a passing young man whose alien tweeds and boots told her he was a compatriot of hers.

He was still standing guard beside her five minutes later when, at long last, she arrived at the desk of the Crillon and called for her key, only to have the very clerk who had handed her a pen to register with that morning look at her without recognition and blandly ask, "Whom does mademoiselle wish to see?" At that a cold fear clutched her heart, a sudden surrender to a panic that she had fought back as preposterous when first it visited her as she sat and twisted her handkerchief in the waiting room of the doctor's office on the Left Bank;

a panic born when, after the doctor had casually told her he had no telephone, she heard the fretful ringing of its bell on the other side of his walnut door.

This then was the predicament of the young English girl as she stood there at the desk of the hotel in Paris—a stranger in the city and a stranger to its bewildering tongue. She had arrived that morning from India and had left her ailing mother in charge of the house physician while she went out in quest of medicine for her—a quest in which, through a malignant conspiracy between perverse circumstances and apparently motiveless passers-by, she had lost four hours.

But now with the bottle of medicine clutched in her hand, she reached the hotel at last, only to be stared down by the clerk at the desk, only to have the very man who had shown them their rooms with such a flourish that morning now gaze at her opaquely as though she were some slightly demented creature demanding admission to someone else's apartment.

But, no, mam'zelle must be mistaken. Was it not at some other hotel she was descended? Two more clerks came fluttering into the conference. They all eyed her without a flicker of recognition. Did mam'zelle say her room was No. 342? Ah, but 342

was occupied by M. Quelquechose. Yes, a French client of long standing. He had been occupying it these past two weeks and more. Ah, no, it would be impossible to disturb him. All this while the lobby, full of hurrying, polyglot strangers, reeled around her.

She demanded the registration slips only to find in that day's docket no sign of the one she herself had filled out that morning on their arrival, the while her tired mother leaned against the desk and told her how. And even as the clerk now shuffled the papers before her eyes, the stupefying bloodstone which she had noticed on his ring finger when he handed her the pen five hours before, winked at her in confirmation.

From then on she came only upon closed doors. The same house physician who had hustled her off on her tragic wild-goose chase across Paris protested now with all the shrugs and gestures of his people that he had dispatched her on no such errand, that he had never been summoned to attend her mother, that he had never seen her before in all his life. The same hotel manager who had so sympathetically helped her into the carriage when she set forth on her fruitless mission, denied her now as flatly and somehow managed to do it with the same



THE WONDERFUL MOVING SIDEWALK AND PROMENADE,
A UNIQUE FEATURE OF THE EXPOSITION.

sympathetic solicitude, suggesting that mam'zelle must be tired, that she should let them provide another chamber where she might repose herself until such time as she could recollect at what hotel she really belonged or until some inquiries should bring in news of where her mother and her luggage were, if—

For always there was in his ever polite voice the unspoken reservation that the whole mystery might be a thing of her own disordered invention. Then, and in the destroying days that followed, she was only too keenly aware that these evasive people—the personnel of the hotel, the attachés of the embassy, the reporters of the *Paris Herald*, the officials at the Sûreté—were each and every one behaving as if she had lost her wits. Indeed there were times when she felt that all Paris was rolling its eyes behind her back and significantly tapping its forehead.

Her only aid and comfort was the aforesaid Englishman who, because a lovely lady in distress had come up to him in the street and implored his help, elected thereafter to believe her against all the evidence which so impressed the rest of Paris. He proved a pillar of stubborn strength because he was some sort of well-born junior secre-

tary at the British Embassy with influence enough to keep her agony from gathering dust in the official pigeon-holes.

His faith in her needed to be unreasoning because there slowly formed in his mind a suspicion that for some unimaginable reason all these people—the hotel attendants and even the police—were part of a plot to conceal the means whereby the missing woman's disappearance had been effected. This suspicion deepened when, after a day's delay, he succeeded in forcing an inspection of Room 342 and found that there was no detail of its furnishing which had not been altered from the one etched into the girl's memory.

It remained for him to prove the mechanism of that plot and to guess at its invisible motive—a motive strong enough to enlist all Paris in the silent obliteration of a woman of no importance, moreover a woman who, as far as her daughter knew, had not an enemy in the world. It was the purchased confession of one of the paper-hangers, who had worked all night in the hurried transformation of Room 342, that started the unraveling of the mystery.

By the time the story reached me, it had lost all its content of grief and become as unemotional as an anagram. Indeed, a few years ago it was a kind of circulating parlor game and one was

challenged to guess what had happened to the vanished lady. Perhaps you yourself have already surmised that the doctor had recognized the woman's ailment as a case of the black plague smuggled in from India; that his first instinctive step, designed only to give time for spiriting her out of the threatened hotel, had, when she died that afternoon, widened into a conspiracy on the part of the police to suppress, at all costs to this one girl, an obituary notice which, had it ever leaked out, would have emptied Paris overnight and spread ruin across a city that had gambled heavily on the great Exposition for which its gates were even then thrown wide.

The story of this girl's ordeal long seemed to me one of the great nightmares of real life and I was, therefore, the more taken aback one day to have its historicity faintly impaired by my discovering its essence in a novel called *The End of Her Honey-moon* which the incomparable Mrs. Belloc-Lowndes wrote as long ago as 1913. Then I find myself wondering if she unearthed it in the archives of the Paris police or whether she spun its mystery out of her own macabre fancy, making from whole cloth a tale of such felicitous invention that, like Stockton's *The Lady or the Tiger* or Anatole France's *The Procurator of Judea*, it had

moved from land to land with the seven-league-boots of folk-music and so been told and retold at hearths the world around by people who had never read it anywhere.

FOOTNOTE: The story of "The Vanishing Lady" is a fair specimen of folklore in the making. For such a story to travel round the world by word of mouth, it is necessary that each teller of it must believe it true, and it is a common practice for the artless teller to seek to impart that belief to his listeners by affecting kinship, or at least a life-long intimacy, with the protagonist of the adventure related. In my entertaining, desultory, and (with one exception) fruitless researches in the origin of twenty such world-girdling tales, I have often challenged one of these straw-man authorities, only to have it vanish as utterly as did the ailing lady from the Place de la Concorde. In the case of this story, which was used not only by Mrs. Belloc-Lowndes but by Lawrence Rising in a later novel called *She Who Was Helena Cass*, I can report that it is a favorite, seemingly, with old ladies on shipboard, those rootless widows who wear buttoned shoes with cloth tops and whose families, with ill-concealed delight, persuade them to

do a good deal of traveling. The story will be whispered as gospel truth from steamer-chair to steamer-chair, with such shakings of the head and such Lord-have-mercy casting up of pious glances that it seems ever new, and, with that air about it, gets submitted so regularly to the fiction magazines that it has threaded many an editorial head with untimely silver. One day I received word of its having been published as a news story in the London *Daily Mail* as early as 1911, the bare facts substantiated by affidavits from attachés of the British Embassy in Paris. Here, I said with relief, is the end of my quest, only to have Richard Hen-

ry Little point out in the Chicago *Tribune* that the entire story had been dashed off by Karl Harriman one hot summer night in 1889 to fill a vacant column in the next morning's issue of the Detroit *Free Press*. Closing in on my quarry, I called upon the blushing Harriman to tell me whether he had invented the story or, like the rest of us, heard it somewhere in his travels. He said he could not remember. Thereupon I felt free to consider the question still open, for, without wishing to reflect on the fecundity of his imagination, I beg leave to doubt if any man could invent a tale like "The Vanishing Lady" and thereafter forget that he had done so.

NOTE: There was, in fact, another World Exposition in Paris in 1889, and earlier fairs had been held there in 1878 and 1867. ED.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



E. C. BENTLEY

I passed some kids on the street the other day, and overheard them discussing the difficulties of slaying a two-headed monster. I don't know who the unlucky warrior was, but I did eavesdrop long enough to learn the reason why such a deed is so tricky. Apparently "there's just too little space" between the heads in which to maneuver with any bravado and speed.

I sympathize with the hero's frustration. You stalk the beast, only to have him elude your grasp. I was elated, for instance, to stumble upon the first of E. C. Bentley's Philip Trent books, only to feel thwarted when I learned that

the author had seen fit to write but three of them. Foiled again.

Three is better than none, however, unless you're speaking of bill collectors, and I promise you that if you like your detectives brainy, British, and born before 1900, you too will fondly curse the author for not having kept his pen to the grindstone. A word of caution here: Trent may not be everyone's cup of tea. By today's standards, there are few thrills and chills. The action is generally confined to the exercise of Trent's iconoclastic mind. And the hero is very fond of spouting lines of poetry, to the aggravation of his friends. But Dorothy Sayers said of *Trent's*

Last Case that it was "the one detective story of the present century which I am certain will go down as a classic." And that's the best clue I can give you.

Trent's Last Case, published in 1913, is actually the first in the series. Since it is often referred to as standard reading in the genre, I looked it up in Dils Wynn's delightful *Murder Ink* for proof. Sure enough, *Trent's Last Case* takes its rightful place in the "Haycraft-Queen Definitive Library of Detective-Crime-Mystery Fiction," and is credited therein with bringing naturalism in characterization to the mystery. I'll buy that, so let me tell you something about Bentley's lead character, Philip Trent.

When Trent first appears, in *Trent's Last Case*, he's in his late twenties, has regular features, short curling hair and mustache, and a demeanor suggesting "a slight but not defiant carelessness about externals." That suits him: his main occupation is painting. When an international tycoon is murdered, however—when "the life had departed from one cold heart vowed to the service of greed"—Trent is immediately dispatched by the *London Record* to get the story. Some years back, it seems, he had written a letter to that giant

newspaper offering a solution to a crime that was then front-page news. His armchair deductions had proved to be absolutely correct, and subsequently he had become a well-known figure to the press, the public, and the police by repeating his early success.

But Trent's reputation is truly on the line over the case of Sigbee Manderson's murder. There are suspects galore, and motives aplenty for killing the ruthless tyrant. The waters are further muddled because the lovely, young Mrs. Manderson is niece to a kindly old friend of Trent's; worse, Trent finds himself falling in love with her. I won't tell you whodunit, or even whether Trent gets his girl, but I will warn you that a totally unexpected twist at the end may make you, too, swear off amateur detection—just as Trent vows to do at the conclusion.

Fortunately for his readers, Bentley found occasion to resurrect Trent in *Trent's Own Case* and *Trent Intervenes*. The first is the story of a psychopath whom Trent characterizes as "a cross between Cardinal Manning and Lucretia Borgia." His cunning plot to frame our hero instead ensnares Trent's old friend. Here again are strong characters whose special foibles

move the plot, rather than the other way around.

Trent Intervenes is a volume of twelve short stories, with the emphasis placed on Trent's ingenuity at solving riddles. A few of the stories don't even involve real crimes. I was reminded by them of the shorter Sherlock Holmes tales: the reader is given the same clues the detective has, but Trent alone makes sense of them,

then reveals all in a dramatic denouement. I think the best is the last, titled "The Ordinary Hairpins," but you have to appreciate the Victorian-lace morality (and sentimentality) of the day.

Trent characterizes himself in one of the stories as "a scatter-brained man—or shall we call him a man of tropically luxuriant mental gifts?" I leave it to you to choose

MYSTERY REVIEWS

There are lots of recent releases worth noting, so I'll try to talk fast.

The Man With a Load of Mischief (Little, Brown, \$12.95, 263 pp.) is the name of one of those ubiquitous inns that dot the English countryside. It is also the site of a grisly murder, one of a string of them striking the quaint village of Long Piddleton. With no little mischief herself, author Martha Grimes has served up a delicious Christmas pudding of a book, with appealing characters (and names like Twig, Pluck, and Melrose Plant), snow-covered scenery that will make Anglophiles pine, and dialogue in the vein of Oscar Wilde. Grimes plays cricket: she has devised a compelling and believable mystery for the genial Inspector Jury to puzzle out, and there's even a hair-raising scene in the final pages. I'd love to have another Inspector Jury mystery in my next Christmas stocking.

Dead Matter is a publishing term for setting-copy and page proofs of books after they *are* books. It's also the title of Steven Frimmer's novel narrated by an engaging young editor at a small New York publishing house who becomes involved in a top-secret operation to smuggle out a Russian dissident's manuscript. What's irresistible here is the backstage look at book publishing, from "agent lunches" to unsolicited manuscripts. (Unpublished authors will have their worst fears confirmed.) (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, \$13.50, 222 pp., and a Detective Book Club Selection.)

Dr. Hannah Land, recently transplanted from New York to the slower rhythms of Duke University, reappears in Amanda Mackay's **Death on the Eno**. A broken leg doesn't stop her from delving into the suspicious circumstances surrounding a fatal canoeing accident on the nearby Eno River. The characters are contemporary and fresh, but some readers may find the pace a bit too much like that of rural North Carolina. (Little, Brown, \$12.95, 231 pp.)

Gravedigger offers something altogether different. This is the sixth of Joseph Hansen's novels to feature Dave Brandstetter, crack death-claims insurance investigator. There's a strong plot with missing persons, a doomed marriage-to-be, an attempted suicide, and mass murder by a Manson-like sex cult. All this is carefully balanced by the personal turmoil of Brandstetter—who is gay—and his crucial relationships to both loved ones and dangerous enemies. (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, \$12.50, 183 pp.)

The Manuscript Murders (St. Martin's Press, \$10.95, 208 pp.) stars Roy Harley Lewis's protagonist, Matthew Coll, ex-agent and now antiquarian bookseller. The plot's a bit thick, but the fun surrounds the title: the manuscript in question is the alleged diary of the woman presumed by scholars to be the "Dark Lady" of Shakespeare's sonnets.

Shakespeare—or the question of who actually wrote the plays attributed to him—also plays a part in a sub-plot of **The Amateur** (Dell, \$3.25, 302 pp.). Author Robert Littell (*The Debriefing*) again displays a masterful touch at creating the kind of Cold War thriller that delights readers of John Le Carré. At the center is young Charlie Heller, a whiz kid at puzzles, whose special talents have landed him an exalted position in the cryptography branch of the CIA. Here's a harrowing tale of an average guy who snaps when his fiancée is brutally murdered by terrorists, and vows to avenge her death even if it means going up against the Agency itself. I hope the forthcoming movie is as good as the book!

The Seven Dreamers by Bernard St. James (Doubleday Crime Club, \$10.95, 180 pp.) takes place in the early nineteenth century in Paris. Chief Inspector Blanc is faced with the tantalizing puzzle of seven men and women who are found primly sitting in a front parlor—each with his throat cut. Blanc's investigation puts him face to face with a vengeful mastermind of frightening powers; meanwhile, there's continual interdepartmental feuding in the government—a commonplace occurrence made sinister in light of

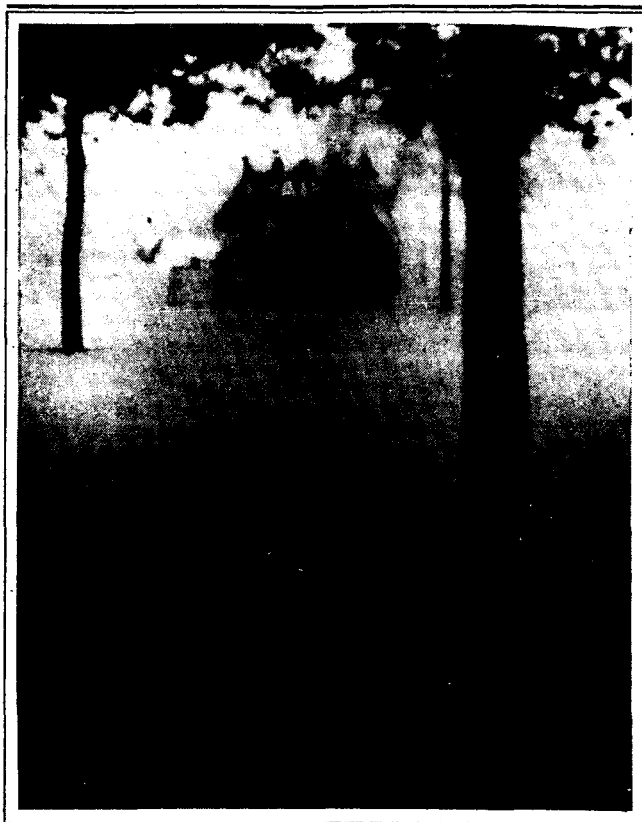
the terrors of the French Revolution. I'm keeping my eyes open now for *April Thirtieth*, the first Blanc mystery.

Two recent paperbacks (Avon, \$2.25 each) offer lightweight hammock reading. **Blood Will Have Blood** by Linda J. Barnes features Michael Sprague—independently wealthy, trained as an actor, possessed of a flair for investigation, and blessed with a real Auntie-Mame aunt. A desperate producer hires Sprague to join the cast of *Dracula* before the horrible pranks turn deadly. In **A Ragged Plot**, Richard Barth again involves Margaret Binton, his senior-citizen sleuth, in a tale that appears to center around one of those urban vacant-lot garden plots—but quickly turns into a plot to murder her.

An Oxford Tragedy by J. C. Masterman is another in the Dover series of reprinted classic mysteries (\$3.50, 187 pp.). Written in the 1930's by an Oxford don, it is set—not surprisingly—at St. Thomas' College, Oxford, and an Oxford don is the victim. The narrator is another don, and his voice lends much to this well-told tale.

They're not private eyes or even willing amateur sleuths, but separated husband and wife Felix and Virginia Freer somehow find themselves at the scene of the crime in E. X. Ferrars' **Thinner Than Water** (Doubleday Crime Club, \$10.95, 180 pp.). They show up together in a small English village to witness a wedding, and wind up attending the funeral of the groom's father instead. Very British, but this is also a sturdy psychological mystery by a long-time mystery writer.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



For whom is the carriage waiting, and why? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10017.

FICTION

Tall Tommy and the Millionaire

by S.S.
Rafferty



Illustration by Peter Kuper

Thank God February has only twenty-eight days because it is the worst month for business at the bistro I own on Third Avenue. Right after the holidays my society swells start their exodus to Palm Springs, the Riviera, or places that are invariably named Costa Del Something and cost del everything. By February 1st, I could rent the joint out as a warehouse or a branch of Campbell's Funeral Home. This can be very depressing to a standup comic like me, so in February, I relax the house charge account limit and let my riffraff pals in for the company of it. Costly, but comforting. Without an audience, I veg out.

The only problem is on the first Monday in the month. The assemblage in the bar lounge is paying more attention to Tall Tommy Tanuka than they are to me.

Ingrates.

But who's to cavil. Tall Tommy is the best in his business, which is being a professional liar. I don't mean like an ad man or a PR guy—mere pickers. Tall Tommy is world class in mendacity, and he makes one swell living at it, too, which is another reason not to cavil because at least he's paying cash for his potables.

You see, Tall Tommy Tanuka sells lies to people in tight spots. For instance, let's say a guy gets lost with a bimbo for a couple of days and wants to go home to wifey. What excuse is he going to use? Most of us would come up with some wimp-type lie that a cloistered nun could see through. But call in Tall Tommy, and man, you've got yourself a beauty, a scenario complete with all the trimmings. He is so good that in his presence polygraph machines blow fuses and truth serum curdles.

•

So it's around eleven P.M. of this Monday in a dreary February, and Tall Tommy is telling us about a mob type who's on his death bed over in Jersey and calls for Tanuka's services. The hood knows that his minutes are numbered, and he wants a great story to tell St. Peter so he can get inside the gates of heaven. It's the high point, the apex, of Tall T's career—he's going to put one over on God. Now that's chutzpah; that's a pro!

His rendition is so terrific it is moving Barry Kantrowitz, my partner (and former agent, when I was working the flat floors on the road), to tears.

"You know, Chick," Barry says to me, "this is the *ligner* of *ligners*. Even God would believe him!"

I didn't get to answer him because there was someone at my elbow, someone I was glad to see because he is my favorite millionaire and we sorely needed another paying guest. Jay Porter Pemberton is a Wall Street type, old money, stuffy, but a very nice guy. He looked awful.

"Could I speak with you privately, Chick?"

My "sure, Jay Porter," and his "privately" didn't make a dent in Barry, who came along with us to the back office. Pemberton didn't seem to mind, so I let it ride, but I thought he

should have stayed. One of these days he's going to need a plausible fib to tell the Big Booking Agent in the Sky. Boy, does he have things to answer for—like screwing up my career.

I grabbed the chair behind the desk before Barry could get to it. A guy behind a desk is always in control. Barry flopped on the leather couch, but Pemberton preferred to pace up and down like that poor puma I love over in the Central Park Zoo. (I'm going to turn that blue-eyed thing loose someday.)

"Why don't you take a seat, Jay Porter? The broadloom needs a rest."

"Chick," he said nervously, taking one of the Eames chairs facing me, "I came to you because I haven't any place else to turn. You're experienced in such matters, and . . ."

He had taken a paper from his jacket pocket and was waving it about as he rambled on. I reached over and took it from him. Rude, perhaps, but the suspense was becoming too intense. It was a Xerox copy of a letter from a lawyer in Providence, Rhode Island, to someone named Samson Velker on East 89th Street in Manhattan, advising him of a legal strategy. It seems Jay Porter had been playing kissy-kissy with Velker's wife, Gina. Now I understood the "you're experi-

enced in such matters" statement. I wasn't insulted—a guy with three divorces behind him is beyond insults.

Barry gets into the act by coming to the desk and reading over my shoulder. "Having a conversation with a man's wife is criminal?" he asks. "A million dollar conversation!"

"Criminal conversation is a concept in common law," Jay Porter explained. "It gives a spouse the exclusive privileges of sexual relations with his partner. I looked it up. Rhode Island is a common law state."

I re-read the letter. "Jay Porter, this is like an alienation of affections thing, and they never stand up. What you need is a lawyer."

"No, Chick. Alienation and conversation are two different things. A loss of affection is almost impossible to prove. But that's not the point. It's the ensuing publicity that could destroy my name and my marriage. I'm an elder of my church, and my clients are all . . ."

"Take it easy, pal."

He didn't. ". . . and I can hardly go to a lawyer with a copy of a purloined letter. No ethical attorney would . . ."

"Jay Porter, STOP!" He did. "Now, slowly and calmly, lay it all out like you would a prospectus on a new stock issue."

Believe me, if he writes a prospectus in the same garbled, confused way he told me the Velker story, American finance is in big trouble. Somehow I put it all together and shuffled it into a neat pack, with all the suits in the right place. I'll deal it out to you painlessly.

That afternoon, Jay Porter had received the copy of the letter in the mail, from a girl named Lisa Banks who worked as a secretary in a Providence law office.

"Lisa is the only daughter of an elderly fisherman who did odd jobs up at my summer place in Newport," Jay Porter explained. "Unfortunately, he was injured in a docking accident, and I covered all his expenses and put him on a retainer and paid Lisa's way through secretarial school in Boston. The old man died last year, and although the daughter owes me nothing, I guess she felt she was repaying me somehow by sending me a copy of that letter. Of course I appreciate the warning, but she *has* put herself in legal jeopardy, so I can't get legal counsel down here until this Providence lawyer, Procutto, contacts me."

It gets worse, lots worse. Old Jay Porter started down the road to bankruptcy on January 16th, when a severe wind and

ice storm decided to raise hell along the New England coast.

"I have a look-in caretaker of sorts, who lives in Newport, but when I called for a report on the storm, he was sick in bed. There's been a lot of looting up there lately after winter storms, so I told Seth I'd be up myself. When I got there the next morning, it wasn't all that bad. Part of the wharf and hangar were gone . . ."

"Hangar!" Barry was impressed. "You keep a plane up there!"

"Heavens, no," Jay Porter assured him with a millionaire's aplomb, "the Jet Star is kept at LaGuardia. The 'hangar' is really a boathouse, like the winter one at our Little Neck place, but hydroplane people call them hangars. You've met my wife Byerle, Chick. She's an hydroplane enthusiast. Her father was Skip Dorlan, who was killed in the World Cup race in '68—a terrible tragedy—and to console my wife, I've been underwriting Skip's Sea Dart boat and crew. Lord, I could keep a string of race-horses for what that program costs me. More to the point, however, Byerle was in Jamaica to observe the Carib trials, dash the luck. If she'd been with me, this . . . this *person*, wouldn't have a leg to stand on. When I told Byerle on

the phone about my trip, she was against it. Should have listened."

"Bad break, Jay Porter," I said, "but even more to the point, how's about Mrs. Gina Velker?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Well, the main house was in fine shape, and since the snow had started again, I decided to spend the night. Around eight o'clock, there was a frantic pounding on the door, and I found this woman standing there freezing to death. Her car had skidded off the main highway, and she saw my lights. She must have walked a mile across open fields to get there, poor thing."

"She isn't going to be a *poor* thing if her hubby gets a million bucks out of you. You said woman, Jay Porter. How old? Looks?"

"Well, she's in her late twenties, I would estimate, attractive, quite pleasant."

"And she spent the night, right?"

"Well actually," he hesitated, "she spent the weekend. It was late Monday afternoon before the phones went on again and I could get us plowed out."

"Okay, now the hard part. Did you have a conversation with her?"

"Oh, quite a lot, even though we didn't have too much in common."

"*Criminal* conversation, Jay Porter. Did you shake her bones?"

The elder of the church looked horrified. "Chick, need I remind you that I am a gentleman."

The poor dope meant it, and I believed him. He is a gentleman with a capital G, a true rarity. Most of my friends can be described with a capital B, but not Jay Porter Pemberton.

The clincher to the whole mess is that, when they got plowed out and got to her car, it had a busted axle, and he drove her back to New York, stopping for lunch and dinner along the way. He had been seen with her by half the people in southern New England, which is one passel of witnesses—garage men, snow plow operators, waitresses, the whole works.

"It's a *sticklech*," Barry says with a yawn from the couch. He was lying down. Jay Porter gives me a quizzical look, since Yiddish is not his long suit.

"*Sticklech*. A trick—a scam—the old bamboozle."

"But that's preposterous, Chick. Gina was a very nice woman. Not refined in the proper sense, but certainly a decent person."

"Decent, he says!"

"Shut up, Barry," I snapped. "Jay Porter, you've got a hassle

and a half on your hands. I still think you should see a lawyer, purloined letter or not. First thing you have to determine is whether it's a scam or a legit misunderstanding on the husband's part."

"If you want to test a lie," Barry said from flat on his back, "ask a master *ligner*. Ask Tall Tommy Tanuka."

My prone partner has an idea, so with Jay Porter's permission, I invite Tommy T back to the office. While I dealt Tall Tommy the story (burying the identities, of course), the *ligner* of *ligners* sat drinking Metaxa and beer, which is a disgusting sight. When I finished, he said, "If it is a scam, the best defense is impotence. I had a client once in Chicago who . . ."

"We don't want to allow it to get into court, Tall Tommy. The guy never laid a glove on her, that's flat."

"I'm not talking about court, man, I'm talking about defense. If it's a scam, it busts it sky high. Even if it's a misunderstanding, it still blows it to hell. Now, this guy in Chicago took my advice and got outta the jam by taking some female hormones on the sly and then he gets himself examined by some sex doctors who pronounce him sexually dead."

Barry groaned from the couch. "This is a good way to save money?"

"Well, he beat the rap," Tall T said triumphantly, "only now he's living with a twenty-year-old boy model in Evanston and his wife is suing him for divorce. I didn't have to tell you that last part, fellas, but when Tanuka makes a lie, he always tells the truth about it."

Jay Porter is turning green, so being behind the desk, I exercise control. "You're missing the point, Tall Tommy. We want to know if the broad showing up at this guy's Newport house in a snowstorm was *stickle* or legit."

He pondered. "Legit, as far as the snowstorm. Who could make up snow! The busted car, maybe. If it's a scam it was probably cooked up after the fact. I'll make a morning line of ten to one the wife showed up three days late and tells the truth to this bozo and it gives him ideas. Now, the nut of the matter is that the mark is going to lose some jack . . ."

"Money isn't the problem," Jay Porter said as aloofly as only a millionaire can, "it's the publicity. To offer them a bribe wouldn't solve anything. Black-mailers never stop at one payment."

Tall Tommy is a little miffed at being interrupted. "As I was

about to say, *unless* he fights fraud with fraud."

"Lay it out, Tall Tommy."

"It's simple, Chick. The bozo is claiming this mark lured his wife into an affair, and that makes the lawyers pant like hounds for a contingency slice. But if the lawyers find out that this dame plays around with more than one guy, they drop the case because they haven't got one."

"Why, that's immoral! You're suggesting we tarnish this woman's reputation!"

Tall Tommy gives me a "who's this hoople" look.

"He's an elder of his church," I explain.

"That's not a very original scheme, Tall Tommy. It used to work in paternity suits before they got those blood tests up to snuff, but this is different." That's Barry's two cents.

"I don't mean a whole bunch of guys giving phony affidavits; that's for punks and it's bad lying. All you need is to have her seen with a guy with a notorious reputation, a real rat with women. Let the bozo's lawyer get a sniff of that and the ballgame's over." He got to his feet. "That's all I can do for you gents. It's the impotence dodge, the rat caper, or, well, you could have them knocked off."

When the door closed behind him, Barry sat up. "I like the

Don Juan angle," he said with a leer, and I know exactly what's going on in that crafty agent's brain of his. Come February 28th, we will have to come up with five G's on the mortgage and another ten to keep us going until the swells come home. He looked at me and then at my millionaire.

"Hell, no!" I shouted.

Operation Gina Velker started two days later (three bars of "Just a Gigolo," please). Two days, because that's how long it took Cy Tregannon, a P.I. I know, to put together the stake-out, the movement pattern, and the general poop on the Velkers. Tregannon dished it up with a written report and some fuzzy pix via a telephoto lens. First, the report:

"The Velkers are out to give the impression that Jay Porter has tossed a wrench into their marriage works, so Samson has moved out of the nest into a one-room dump on the rim of the barrio several blocks north of the modest digs they used to call home on 89th near the East River. Samson works as a clerk in a local dry cleaners, and all Gina seems to do is shop in neighborhood stores."

The telephoto pix didn't meld much excitement to the deal. When Samson Velker's ma and

pa hung that monicker on him, they either had great expectations in genealogy or faith in high protein diets. They lost. He looked like he was put together with only half a box of Tinker Toys—he was thin, knobby-jointed, and fragile. The guy was a mugger's dream, which wouldn't hurt his case in a courtroom once the solid, muscle-toned, tanned lecher-millionaire showed up. But, since the entire exercise was to keep it out of court, I concentrated on Gina. Not that Tregannon's pictures gave me much to concentrate on except the regulation New York woman's winter wear—bulk. She looked like a sausage in boots.

To make matters worse, I couldn't plan the strategy myself because my partner Bigmouth Barry had gathered the merry men, who consider themselves responsible for all the aspects of my young life. First and not foremost, Mario Puccini, who runs a limo for hire out of East 76th Street, only I seem to be the only soul who has his phone number. Then, of course, we have the boys from the club staff: Jack McCarthy, my kitchen manager; Guido LaSalle, my chief chef; Cuz D'Amico, the lead barkeep; Ling, the *maitre d'*; Barry; and one invitee, Tall Tommy Tanuka. Not one of them ever agrees

with me except Guido, and he's usually squiffed.

"I like the supermarket ploy," says Guido.

"I don't," says Barry. "Who's going to believe Chick even knows what the inside of a supermarket looks like?"

"The broad won't know that," Cuz says. I don't know, whether he's defending me or just the idea. And I *do* know what the inside of a supermarket looks like, by the way, at least through the windows.

Now Barry gets cute. "Okay, Chick, what's the first thing you do when you go into a supermarket?"

"You take a number from the ticket machine, wise guy, so you can get faster service."

"That's a deli, not a supermarket!"

I looked around at the group. "Well, does anyone know what is the first thing you do in a supermarket? I mean, come on, guys, this has to look natural if she's going to tumble."

All I'm getting is dumb looks, which is all you can expect from a bunch of guys who get up at six P.M., live all night in tuxedos, and consider phoning out for chow mein home cooking.

Cuz comes to the rescue. "I guess it's the same in the city. Over in Jersey, they have these baskets on wheels."

"Wheels," I said, getting an

idea. "Wheels could set up a collision scene. I crash into this Gina Velker. 'So sorry,' I say, 'how about a drink.' Zap! I'm on my way."

"Very bad."

"Why, Tall Tommy?"

"Because these Velkers love lawsuits. You're going to end up in court."

"I told you the supermarket stuff stank." Barry plays Mr. Paraquat. "Does this broad own a dog? She's got to own a dog. Everyone in New York owns a dog. I read in the paper that there are more dogs than people here."

"Someone must have my quota," I said. "Why a dog, Barry?"

"We get you the same kind of dog and you walk it on her street. It's a great way to pick up girls."

"No dog," Jack Mac reports. "But the supermarket idea would work if Chick let the broad smash into him!"

They all looked at each other in agreement, which was easy for them, since I was the one who had to take the lumps. Besides, I had other qualms: suppose she didn't like me?

"Boy, if I knew when I left the house this morning," Gina Velker was saying across the tablecloth, "that I would almost

cripple a *star* and end up playing Florence Nightingale and having lunch at 21—*wow*. Is that Tom Brokaw over there?"

"Who?"

"Tom Brokaw. You know, the 'Today' show? Jane Pauley, Gene Shalit?"

I could have told her I'd never seen the "Today" show, since I usually sleep till noon or better, but not wanting to rock her boat, I glanced at the next table and whispered to her, "That's ol' Tommy, all right."

It seems all my qualms about my appealing to her were for naught. My luncheon guest was a celebrity junkie, a TV addict, and a professional fan. Instead of a brain, she had a cathode ray tube. Her addiction, however, was a Godsend to the plot, because one of the local channels was re-running the hell out of a sci-fi bomb I made ten years ago. She recognized me when I took the dive in the supermarket and "helped" me to Doc Dranger's office on the West Side, where my ankle was taped and a cane supplied. (Doc Dranger is a friend of Tall Tommy. He is short on ethics and long on whiplash scams and gunshot wounds.)

When we left Dr. Dranger's, I kept the hustle in motion by offering her lunch at 21. Although she was OD'ing on bliss, it wasn't a rubberneck's awe.

She seemed to know that you just don't stroll into 21 at twelve thirty without a reservation and get seated at Table 3.

"The Benchley corner!" she said after Walter had gotten us settled and the drink order was taken. "Did you know Otto Preminger had a fight here over the film rights to *In Cold Blood*? Chick, you have clout. But how come we didn't go to your restaurant?"

"Because a lot of people keep coming up to the table for a smooze, and I wouldn't have a minute to get to know you better."

She blushed happily. "Tom Brokaw has a high P.Q., you know," she said. "What's your P.Q., Chick?"

"P.Q.?"

"Personality Quotient. You know, like I.Q. All stars have P.Q.'s or else they wouldn't be stars. P.Q.'s are different from R.Q.'s . . ."

She went on to tell me about Recognition Quotients (mine was high, according to her) and how, despite Brokaw's likability, the Nielsen ratings hadn't been tiptop on the "Today" show.

I sat there going into a reality warp. Here I was, sitting in a restaurant filled with people who made handsome livings in all forms of communications and finance and who spoke their own trade lingo, and this av-

erage housewife sounded just like them. Maybe it came through the air and you absorbed it via osmosis. But the main difference between Gina and the media types and moguls surrounding us was that she believed it all without question. The kid was like a comatose patient hooked up to a vital life support system that pumped fantasy and vicarious involvement into her.

The plan called for me to squire her around town and get our names in the columns—a real press agent push. With her addiction, she seemed like a sitting duck, but I had to test her F.Q. (that's Fidelity Quotient, folks). I dangled a fix before my heavy user.

"Frank Sinatra," I said, so low it was barely audible. But celebrity freaks have built-in sonar.

"Where?" Her head swiveled 180° east and west, and then she turned sideways to sweep north and south. "Where?"

"Where what?"

"Frank Sinatra. You said *Frank Sinatra!*"

"Oh, I must have mumbled out loud, Gina. Forgive me. I was reminding myself to give him a call about next Tuesday night."

"You are seeing Frank Sinatra on Tuesday? Really, Chick?"

"On the contrary, Gina. I *won't* be seeing Frank on Tuesday. My date wouldn't want to go to the United Charities Ball with a guy with a gimp leg."

It's working like an ounce of gold in a bear market. She's drooling. And she was about to have her credibility sullied with the Providence legal eagle.

"You mean to tell me," Gina is appalled, "that the girls in your set" (*set yet!*) "would turn down a fellow for a date because he had a limp? A temporary limp, at that?"

"Well, you know how it is, Gina. A lot of these Hollywood types dote on physical perfection . . ."

"Farrah Fawcett!"

"Where?"

"No, not here, Chick. I mean, that's your date, right? Don't bother to deny it. I never liked her. Big deal, she was married to the \$6 Million Man for a while . . ."

It was obvious that Farrah was at the top of Gina's hate parade at the moment, and Suzanne Somers, Cher, and, for some reason, Penny Marshall were tied for a close second. Listening to Gina was like a trip through the junk tabloids. Finally, she got down to it.

"You know, Chick, I have half a mind to say I'll go to that ball with you myself, but . . ."

"I know . . . I know . . ." I

lowered my eyes woefully (eat your heart out, O'Toole!) "... I noticed the wedding band three hours ago."

"Oh, Chick," she bubbled, "you really *are* shy. Actually, at the moment, I'm estranged. You know, like Burt Bachrach and Angie Dickinson ... he lives in L.A. and she's in Beverly Hills. Just giving each other some space. Same with Samson and me. The reason I'm hesitant about dating you is that I'm bound to bump into Laszlo Milne in your set."

I had been able to keep up pretty well with her stellar stream of showbiz consciousness. Will Doris Day and Barry Comden have a *reswoonion* some day ... will Sally get Burt ... will Sly really stay with Sasha this time ... all this I could follow. But a Laszlo Milne? In my set?

"Laszlo Milne, the director of 'Tomorrow's Children.' If we meet, he'll probably make a scene."

I knew that "Tomorrow's Children" was a soap opera, and she filled in the rest. She had spotted a continuity booboo on the show—actress walks into elevator wearing scarf, gets off without one—sent it in to one of the tabloid TV blooper columns, and got \$20 and a write-up.

"Gina, that's the continuity

girl's flub. It happens once in a while, and a director could care less. How long have you and your husband been estranged?"

Well, she sure had been chock full of information about Angie and Burt and Doris and Barry and Sly and Sasha, but on Gina and Samson, she was a big "no comment" except to imply that a *reswoonion* was not imminent. But it gave me a clear shot, and I had started setting up our rendez-woo when I damned near choked on a cherrystone clam.

The geography of the first floor saloon room at 21 puts Benchley's corner directly in view of the entry from the outer lobby, and what do I see? I see Byerle Dorlan Pemberton standing at the reception desk! Panic time for me. Her husband always sits at Number 5, which is directly across from us, or at least he did when I was hopping around town with him. If somewhere out there in the lobby is Jay Porter taking wifey to lunch, and if Byerle gives me a wave and Gina is hip to my knowing the millionaire, it is goodbye mortgage money. It was time to move.

"Where are you going, Chick? Oh, sandbox. Take it easy on the ankle."

I "painfully" made my way

across the saloon and into the foyer.

"Oh, hello. Chick Kelly, isn't it? Have you had an accident?"

"Sprained ankle," I said, looking around unsuccessfully for Jay Porter. I turned back to Byerle, which is not too hard to do. The Caribbean sunkiss still clung to her tinted skin, which heightened the blonde in her hair and the famous Dorlan good looks. But although old Skip may have put his physical imprint into this long, lean beauty, his devil-may-care style didn't take. Byerle Porter was a bit of a stick, and prone to looking down her nose at things; but then, come to think of it, that fitted her husband's world.

"Jay Porter with you?"

"No, heavens no," she said, her eyebrows arching. "Not during the Levcott merger."

"The only reason I'm asking is that the saloon is very noisy today and . . ."

" . . . and Jay Porter hates babble," she interrupted. "I know, that's why his fascination with your place has always amazed me. I won't be sitting in the saloon anyway. Mr. Pete has a table for us up in the Bottle Room. We're meeting Phil Dunn from *Sports Illustrated*. Oh, here you are, Buzz, late as usual."

"Sorry, Mrs. P." The speaker was what my niece would call

a blond hunk. He had just brought his tanned face, blond hair, and snow white teeth in from 52nd Street to warm our spirits better than the fireplace crackling in the small lounge area of the lobby.

I guess Byerle felt she had to be polite. "Buzz, meet Chick Kelly." Then, to me, "Buzz Tierney is the lead driver on the Sea Dart—my father's hydroplane."

I shook hands, or rather, I stuck mine out and had it worked over as if it were a bilge pump.

"Hey, Chick," he said with exuberance, "been to your place a couple of times. Very funny stuff." He turned to his boss. "Dunn here yet?"

"No, but we'll go up anyway." She gave an imperial nod to Harry behind the reservation desk, who rebounded it to Freddie, the stairway escort, and off they started, to my relief. Byerle was almost out of earshot, but I could hear her unladylike response to something Tierney told her. "Damn it, you promised it would work. Suppose Jay Porter finds out."

That little piece of patty cake was none of my business, so I got back into my act and entered the "sandbox" and gabbed with Otis, the attendant, for a few seconds before heading back to Miss Stars-in-Her-Eyes.

She had a hurt look on her

face. "They were nobodies, Gina. I do know *some* nobodies."

"That's *all* I know . . ." she smiled, " . . . except for you, Chick."

That was lunch. By ten o'clock that night, Gina Velker was definitely on her way to becoming a somebody.

To pull it off, I was calling in a lot of owed favors from news guys, columnists, and PR flacks. Thursday morning's newspapers carried gossip column items about Chick Kelly's new heartthrob, and one of the tabloids had a picture of us at Studio 54, non-dancing. Since most of the real celebrities were out of town, I was getting more attention than I actually deserved. By noon, the local TV gossip hens were on the phone, and I gave each of them a little tidbit to nibble on. For instance, my "no comment, give me a break, she's a married lady" statement got us two whole minutes on the six o'clock news' "People and Places" segment. I knew we were in clover when the junk tabloids started phoning in for the dirt.

But all this razzmatazz was nothing to what I had planned for Thursday night. It was snowing hard when I rang Gina's doorbell at eight fifteen. I expected to find a wide-eyed

lady who had been stunned by her instant celebrity. Instead, I was the stunned one and she was the stunning. For a second, I didn't think it was the plain Jane dame I had dragged around town the night before.

"Elizabeth Arden," she said, touching her perfectly manicured nails to her professionally madeup face. Even the mousy off-blonde hair had been touched with soft gold. "Halston," she went on, as she pirouetted to show me the flare of a sexy crepe outfit.

Damn it, the girl was a knockout, and I found myself wishing she weren't a crook. But crook she was, at least so my further information from Tregannon, the private investigator, had indicated. It seemed that Samson Velker was so dumb and such a mope that dreaming up the criminal conversation scheme was beyond him, which left only my darling date as the heavy.

"Very nice, Gina," I said, taking off my topcoat. "Must have cost a quid or two."

She kissed me on the cheek. "That's a thank you, not an invitation; at least not yet. Thank you for my chrysalis. I looked it up. It's a butterfly coming out of the cocoon. I don't mean just getting gussied up or buying new clothes, either. I got this dress on markdown. I'm a good

shopper. Always have been, but until I met you, I never had the courage to buy one. Maybe courage is the wrong word. Confidence? Poise? I don't know, but I feel like saying to the world, 'Damn it, look at me!' That's always been my problem, Chick. I've been too shy. I was a wallflower at dances and a secretarial school dropout because taking dictation embarrassed me. Hell, I only had one real girlfriend in my entire life to share things with. I guess I ended up married to Samson because he posed no threat. Why am I going on like this? I salute you, Chick Kelly, my Pygmalion."

I was half expecting an orchestra to play "I Could Have Danced All Night," but the other half of my brain was taking care of business. "You realize that we are what's known as an item," I said. I wanted to see if she had gotten any flak from Samson. Obviously, she had him on a string because she only kissed me again and said, "Good. I've always wanted to be an item. Is that champagne?"

I held up the gaily wrapped bottle and presented it to her. When I had asked Jack Mac to select a bottle from the joint's wine cellar, I hadn't realized he was going to make a packaging production out of it. "Ah yes, m'deah, a touch of the bubbly."

I gave her some James Mason.

"It's like being with ten different people," she said with childlike glee. Rich Little would have made her blow a fuse. "Let's not open it now, Chick. I want to save this for a special moment."

"Okay, then let's get out our paint set and cover the town."

We started with *blanquette de pecheur* at Lutece, some jazz and juleps at Bechets, and on to the eleven thirty show at the Rainbow Room. Later, we hit the Improv (I did six minutes—pro's privilege) and the disco at Regine's. Note that here I am trotting all over town when I own my own joint, but Jay Porter is picking up the tabs, and besides, I want to spread the "hot item" stuff around.

All of this activity is mere prelude to my blockbuster, which came the next night, or rather at twelve twenty-seven Saturday morning. I know the exact time because that's what the arresting officer put on the rap sheet when we were hauled into the 19th Precinct with the rest of the high rollers from Monk Doyle's private gambling den on Third Avenue in the 70's.

Of course, if Monk ever finds out that I had a hand in tipping the cops to his newest location

(and arranging for the press to be on hand), it will be cement shoes and East River time for yours truly, but I never liked Doyle anyway, so I took the chance.

The guys with the flashguns had a ball, and thanks to our previous exposure, Gina and I got all the attention. Somehow or other, my lawyer, Ted Summers, got us out on a legal maneuver and Mario was waiting with his limo to whisk us to the Plaza, where I had reserved a suite.

"But why can't I go home, Chick? A hotel is silly."

"You won't think so when you see the morning papers, Gina. Your phone won't stop ringing, believe me, and chances are you won't be able to get your number changed until Monday, so you're better off at the Plaza."

"No. I'm going home. I'm sorry, but that's it. As for the phone, I'll take it off the hook. Driver . . ." She gave him the address (which Mario already knew) and there went the frosting on my discredibility cake. She pecked my cheek goodnight at her front steps, said she was tired, and left me standing in a new snowfall.

"Whatcha think, Chick?" Mario says from the driver's seat as we pull away from the curb. "She could be hip to the

plan. Maybe the raid was overkill."

"I don't know, Mario. Something spooked her. Maybe it was the sight of all the blue coats and the seven minutes she spent in a cell. That could have put some cold reality into the consequences of breaking the law."

"It's early. You want to go to the joint?"

I looked out at the snow still coming down at a good clip and said no, and for the first time in twenty years, I was in bed alone at one o'clock in the morning.

Maybe breaking one lifelong precedent sets you up for another, because I woke up to an insistent buzzing. Half an opened eye told me it was two fifteen and the dark outside told me it was still *ante meridian*. The world knows that Chick Kelly does not speak on the phone before noon, but I broke another rule and picked up the receiver. Big problem. I'm listening to a dial tone with one ear and hearing the buzzing with the other. It's the bloody doorbell, and if I don't speak on the phone before noon, you can bet a bundle that I don't answer front doors before one.

The buzzing suddenly turned to knuckle rapping, and as I lay

there getting the blood reintroduced to my brain, I expected the next noise would be the boom of a battering ram. Give 'em an inch and, well, you know the rest.

On my way down the hall and across the living room, I'm figuring out ways to kill whoever's beating the hell out of my door. I know it isn't the Girl Scouts with cookies because they're a civil bunch, bill collectors always dun me at the club, and even my ex-wives' lawyers always send their letters, threatening as they are, via express mail. I figured strangulation or bludgeoning by fist would have to do since I wasn't carrying a gun but, to my surprise, my early morning caller was.

I don't have to tell you that my entire attention was on the gun, so a description of its bearer will be scant. He was shortish and probably on the thinnish side under his soiled trench-coat. In spite of the gun, my comedian's brain was wondering why a guy who works in a dry cleaners walks around with a filthy coat. Samson Velker looked even more haggard in the flesh than he had in Cy Tregannon's telephoto prints.

"What's your problem, pal?" I asked as I slowly brought my hand up to the inside doorknob.

Velker may be rated as a dope, but he sees good. "Don't

try to slam it, Kelly. I didn't come to use it this time, but I can, and I will. This is a warning. Stay away from my wife or I'll kill you." His voice sounded shaky and he delivered the threat as if he were doing a bad imitation of Jimmy Cagney. "No more dates, you hear?"

"Anything you say, mister, but would you mind telling me who you are?" This, friends, is not false bravado. Down the hall, I can see an apartment door open a crack, so I know that Mrs. Rosen is on duty as the eleventh floor *mensch*. I wanted a witness. Velker and I were having our own criminal conversation, and it could include an "assault with a deadly weapon" charge.

"You know goddamned well who I am, Kelly. How many wives are you fooling around with, anyway?"

"Let's not get personal. Who's your wife?"

"Gina Velker!" He shouted it loud and clear, which was swell, because now all the neighbors knew. "And if you so much as talk to her on the phone, I'll put a bullet where you'll turn soprano."

With this finally off his chest, he whirled awkwardly on his heels and stalked down the hall to the elevator. I watched his retreat, his meatless stooped shoulders trying to swagger,

his old fashioned fedora tilted forward on his head, a hand buried deep in the pockets of his dirty raincoat clutching his courage. Exit the pathetic gunman.

When the elevator doors closed behind him, I stage-whispered down the hall to Mrs. Rosen's still cracked doorway. "Hey, Mrs. R," I said, "don't forget a word of anything you just heard. It's important. Write it down, even."

With this, her door opened wide enough for her hairnetted head to appear. "You're a bum, Kelly. That I already knew, a regular Don Juan bummer, and now they come to get you with guns. Good idea you should be a soprano..." the door was closing "... girls coming and going day and night like a Harlem..." Silence. You will note Mrs. R is not a fan.

The gambling bust happened too late to make the early bird editions, and it was just as well, because if, before his visit, Velker had seen what the later morning editions eventually carried, he would have plugged me on the spot. It must have been a slow night for news, for the press pulled out all the stops. Take the headline EAST SIDE RAID BAGS POSH ROLLERS. This was played off against a

four column shot of Gina and me getting into the police van. The cutline read: "COMIC AND CUTIE TO HOOSEGOW AFTER CASINO SWEEP. Chick Kelly, restaurateur/funny man and socialite Gina Velker off to tell it to the judge following gaming bust."

I thought the socialite bit was over-reach, but at least they spelled her name right and the rest of it was pure gravy. When that Providence lawyer learned that the poor waif of the storm was really a jaded swinger with a rep and a rap against her, my mortgage was secure.

I was reading about my public shame over steak and eggs at Table 36 in my joint's lower tier dining room at noon. Normally, this area is only open for dinner, but the scandal had filled the two upper rooms and the bar lounge with gawkers. Ah, sweet justice. I nail Gina's scheme to the floor, land the mortgage dough, get Jay Porter's undying gratitude and then some, and produce a land office business, despite a mere blizzard.

"It is a classic," Tall Tommy Tanuka is saying with pride as he slurps a bowl of Billi Bi. "Truly a beauty scam, Chick. Only one thing bothers me."

"Like what, Tall Tommy?"

"When she balked at going to the Plaza."

"You could look at it in one of two ways. Either she was suddenly hip to our act or, even if she considered me legit, she saw that all the publicity would zonk the criminal conversation charge."

"Maybe," Tall Tommy said skeptically, "but I'd like it cleaner, clearer, you know."

I was about to ask him what the hell he meant by that when Sam, the station captain, brought a phone to the table and plugged in the jack. "Mr. Pemberton for you," he said.

I didn't even get past "hello" before he opened up with the panic. "Chick, I have had a wire from Lisa Bankstelling me that this Velker fellow is hinting about going to the papers if a settlement can't be reached."

"Take it easy, Jay Porter. Haven't you seen the morning editions?"

"No, I'm calling from Little Neck. We're snowed in with several house guests. Getting snowed in is becoming a habit. What's in them?"

I told him, and he said, "Yes, that is decisive, as far as a court case goes. But he can still smear me in the press."

"Well first, Jay Porter, Velker isn't smart enough for blackmail and his wife may have had the wind taken out of her sails. Why don't we give it a few days and I'll negotiate a deal with

the lady?"

"I hope you can, Chick. I'm getting a bit desperate."

I hung up, and Joey, one of the busboys, came to retrieve the phone. He bent down close to my ear and whispered, "Ling says some cops are looking for you up front. Maybe you want to duck out through the kitchen, boss."

"Don't sweat it, Joey." I had half expected some heat over the gambling raid and Ted Summers' slick moves that got me released. Cops on the public morals squad don't like slick moves. They like to follow them up with an hour or two at Police Plaza where I'd get my hands slapped, a court visit, and a fine.

I didn't know the two plain-clothes guys who finally worked their way down to Table 36, but they sure knew me.

"Kelly?" the ugly one grunted.

"Mister Kelly."

"Can it," he said as he reached over the table and frisked me from the waist up. "On your feet." I did, and he completed the job from the waist down.

"What the hell is going on?" The less ugly one took out his handcuffs. "Okay, already, I'll come quietly. Hell, it's only a gambling charge, fellas."

"Turn around, Kelly," the ugly one said, and when I did,

I was cuffed. "I don't know from gambling charges, *Mister Kelly*." He turned me about, took out his celluloid Miranda card, and gave me a sardonic grin. "You're supposed to be a comic, Kelly. Here's a riddle for you. What's the sum of murder one plus murder one? It can't be murder two. Give up? It's a double life sentence. Okay, you have the right to remain silent . . ."

Four hours later, Lieutenant Donald Bullethead Jaffee of Homicide was far from silent and getting hoarser by the minute. He seemed to have the persistent notion that I had poisoned Gina and Samson Velker with Jack Mac's aid and assistance. My kitchen manager had arrived at Police Plaza wearing city bracelets about the same time I did, and was probably going through the same Torquemada drill in some other office on some other floor. I hoped he was playing the same dummy act I was.

"Come on, Kelly," Jaffee said with false friendship. "She had something on you. Why else would a high roller like you be squiring a working class housewife around town? Kelly, we have the lab reports and the autopsy protocol, and they'll hang you. The poison was in-

jected by hypodermic through the sealed champagne bottle cork. We can prove that beyond a doubt. Jack McCarthy's fingerprints are on the bottle's cardboard half-sleeve, and yours are on the fancy paper it was done up in. You wiped the bottle clean, and either forgot about the bottle's sleeve or didn't think it would show prints. We've come a long way with computer enhancement of latent prints, chump. Next time you plan a murder, don't be so sloppy. Remember, you're killing in the space age. That champagne is an exclusive brand, a Chateau La Codar 1958, stored at your club by a customer, a Mr. Pemberton, Jay Porter Pemberton. Your own wine cellar records prove that.

"You poor bastard, you were caught in the middle. The wife is shaking you down and holding you as a trapped lover, and her old man is jealous as hell and wants to kill you. After that scene at your apartment house with the gun, you had no choice. You got them together for a supposed payoff and brought the wine to seal the deal. It's widely known that you only drink vodka and tonic, so you let Velker open the champagne and unsuspectingly pour his wife and himself a toast . . . a toast of freedom for you and death for them. What

did she have on you, Kelly?"

On and on he went with his boring fairy tale, while I was trying to think the whole thing through.

Theory #1: Samson Velker killed his wife and then took a suicide sip, but that idea had two flaws. Why go through with the hypodermic jazz with a sealed cork, and if he was so hurt, why didn't he try to kill me?

But that scenario was more acceptable than Theory #2, which had Jay Porter in the starring role, taking matters into his own hands. True, he keeps his Chateau La Codar at my place, but he must keep some at home, too. He was in a panic, called Gina direct, got her and Velker together for a payoff, and voila! the poison toast bit. This also had a flaw, mainly that Samson Velker, by Mrs. Rosen's observation, was alive at two fifteen on my doorstep, and Gina was still breathing when I dropped her off around twelve forty-five. The M.E. fixed their deaths at between four and five A.M. and, due to the baby blizzard, no one, but no one, was able to get from Jay Porter's manse out at Little Neck, Long Island, to Gina's place on East 89th Street.

I might add that Mrs. Rosen must have gone off duty after the corridor fracas with my pa-

thetic gunman because she told the cops she couldn't give me an alibi for four to five o'clock. Of course, for it to have been iron-clad alibi, she would have had to have been in bed with me, but the least she could have done was to say she never saw me leave the apartment. Never have a non-fan for a neighbor.

I was still ignoring Jaffee and working on Theory #3 when a uniformed cop stuck his head into the office and said, "He's here." Jaffee cocked his bald noggin at me. "Your attorney has finally arrived. We've documented that you were allowed to call him five minutes after you arrived."

Touchy, touchy. The uniform led me to a private room where I expected to find Ted Summers. Instead, who is perched on a chair with all the presence of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes? It is none other than Tall Tommy Tanuka, *ligner of ligners*.

"Thank you, officer, I'll buzz when we're through," he says as he waves me to a chair.

"What in the . . ."

Tall Tommy gives me a shush sign with fingers to lips as he places a briefcase on the table and takes out a small black oblong box. He flips a few switches and turns a dial as he looks innocently up at the ceiling. As

a look of satisfaction crossed his face, I said, "You practice in downtown Moscow, counselor?"

"Better be safe than sorry, Chick. That's a cardinal rule by me. I'm here because your legal eagle is in Albany or some other place up in Canada, so I decide to jump in with an assist. 'Ja really kill 'em?"

"No, 'ju?"

"Hey, Chick, serious up. This is a twenty-to-life we're talking. If you didn't knock them off, we have to find out who did. Okay? Okay! Ever read a detective story?"

"There are times, Tall Tommy, when I believe I'm living in one."

"Then you know that one of the sure-fire ways to catch the culprit is to detect a flaw . . . a lie . . . in his alibi."

"Sure, Tommy," my mouth is saying, but my mind is wondering when in hell Summers is coming back from Albany. "Tommy, I appreciate your help, but man, I need a lawyer, not a liar."

"What's the dif? Come on, Chick, all the details."

All things considered, sitting there talking with Tommy was more pleasant than going back to Jaffee's harangue, so I humored him with all the details from the supermarket spill to 21 and on until the gaming bust.

"The gee's wife, this Byerle, maybe has something going with the boat jockey?" he asked when I reported the overheard "suppose Jay Porter finds out" bit between Tierney and Byerle when they were going up to the Bottle Room.

"Maybe, but that's got nothing to do with the Velker deaths." Even as I said it, my mind must have put a checkmark next to the thought, because it surfaced again within the next forty-eight hours. Meanwhile, Tall Tommy is up on the ankles, as he put it.

"Sit tight and hang tough, Chick. I'm on a quest."

"What's the quest?"

"The truth about the matter at hand."

"Tommy, you're a lie expert, remember?"

"Takes one to know one," he says, and he's off.

Like I said, forty-eight hours later, a thought popped out of my memory bank and took on interesting dimensions. It had zoomed through my head while I was talking to Ted Summers, who had finally gotten Albany back into the union and had time for my problem. I had been in the Tombs prison for two days, having been sent there because a judge felt I was a poor bail risk. By the way, I can tell

you this: one does not need electronic devices to keep one's conversation private in the visitation pens. In fact, the only device you need is a hearing aid to overcome the din in that zoo of babble.

"You realize, Chick," Ted was saying—shouting, "that it's a pretty thin argument, and I don't think the D.A. will buck Jay Porter Pemberton just to satisfy the questions you're raising. Hell, I'm ninety percent convinced we can go to trial and beat this thing. All the state has is circumstantial crap, and the D.A. knows it's full of holes. But we can make a strong emotional case for a husband who was a loser and a psycho, committing murder and suicide in a jealous rage. You get a little dirt on you, but . . ."

"How much did he offer you, Ted?"

"Ten thou. Fifty more if you'll go along."

"Doesn't that tell you something? Jay Porter is scared, my friend."

"Of course he is. He has a reputation to protect."

"And the old bum of the month here doesn't."

"It's not the same, and you know it. The public expects a touch of scandal from showbiz types. Besides, if you introduce the stuff about your scam to

neutralize the criminal conversation action, you'll look like a real bum, the bum of the century, never mind the month. The papers would tear you apart and you might just put yourself in jeopardy of a conspiracy charge."

"What are you trying to do, Ted, scare me?"

"If Velker couldn't with a gun, how can I with logic? If you want me to bring the Pembertons into this, Chick, I'll do it, but at least let me do it my way. Or rather, the diplomatic way, so you have a bridge to retreat over just in case you're wrong." Ted leaned closer to the divider screen between us. "Chick, just tell me why you won't take the easy way out. You're losing your mortgage, the sixty G's, and the backing of a very powerful man. Irish pride?"

"No, it's because of something Tanuka asked me several days ago, about Gina Velker's shying away from the Plaza set-up. I think I have the answer now."

"So be mysterious," Ted was getting to his feet, "and remember, I promise nothing regarding the D.A.'s reaction to your proposal."

I had to yell over the din, "We can but try," to which a woman visiting a prisoner in the stall next to mine responded, "A-

men, brother, a-men!"

That "amen" was the only response I got over the next three days. No D.A. response, no Ted Summers response. Jack Mac and I played every two handed card game known to man during "in cell" hours and every horse race in America in "out cell" time. One thing you can do at the Tombs is use the pay phones to make bets and, for the first time in years, I was ahead on the ponies, so prison has its mind-sharpening aspects. Finally, on a dismal, cold morning, a screw (see how I've warped) rattles our cage and tells me, "Ya goin' ta Leonard."

"S'bout time," says this hardened case.

After a short ride, I found Ted waiting for me on the main floor at the 155 Leonard Street building where the Manhattan D.A. hangs his hat.

"What in the hell is this about?" Summers asks the two delivery guards. He was agitated because my escort had me in hand and ankle manacles complete with lead chain. I looked like Houdini about to jump into a river.

"He's a murder one, max security," the guard on my left informed Ted, the elevator starter, and sundry loiterers in

the lobby. I recommend this kind of announcement to anyone who wants an elevator to himself because, as we approached a waiting car, its passengers decided to get out and wait for a safer ride.

The manacles didn't come off until we were in a small waiting room somewhere on an upper floor. The guards left and Ted filled me in.

"It wasn't easy, Chick. The D.A. is leery, but he knows that, if you're right, he has a job to do, embarrassing as it might be. He's playing it cosy just the same. He won't be here. A young A.D.A. named Ruker will run the show. Mrs. Pemberton and the boat racer, Tierney, think they're here because they met you at 21 the day you were there with Gina Velker. Jay Porter raised hell and his lawyer doubled it, but the D.A. stood firm, so the lawyer and Jay Porter decided to be here, too."

"Jay Porter sniffs a rodent, no doubt."

"And it isn't Mickey Mouse, my friend. However, the fact that Dunn from *Sports Illustrated* is here bolsters the supposed focus on the 21 meeting, so they might be off center."

"How about the Rhode Island lawyer, Procutto?"

"He's coming down by plane

this morning with Tommy Tanuka."

"Tall Tommy! What's he doing in this?"

"Like everybody else, he wanted to help, so I put him to work. He's a very intelligent man and I felt Procutto would be more cooperative if we approached him on a personal basis. Tanuka's been up there for two days, so I guess it took a lot of convincing."

"How about the surprise guy?"

"He's here. You'll see him in the hall as we go into the hearing room. He's not in uniform, but you'll recognize the weatherbeaten face."

"That's the cast of characters, then."

"Except for Jaffee from Homicide . . . best described as the wounded bull. He tried to talk the D.A. out of the setup, and hasn't knocked himself out with cooperation. That's it, Chick, my boy. Now, as they say, 'break a leg.'"

Man, I've worked some tough audiences, but this crowd was grim. The minute I entered the room, a whitehaired guy was on his feet saying, "Mr. Ruker, we were not told that this man would be present."

The ink on Ruker's law degree might still be damp, but he was no slouch at *confre*

counterpunching. "Mr. Dinsmore, let me make it clear at the outset that this is not, repeat, *not*, a forum. It was explained to you all that you were here by invitation, and invitations can be refused. You all accepted yours, and clearly, Mr. Kelly accepted his."

"Mr. Ruker," Dinsmore, obviously Jay Porter's attorney, was about to play the Grand Old Man of Law to this kid behind the desk, "it was *my* understanding that Mrs. Pemberton and Mr. Tierney were called—sorry, invited—to substantiate that Mr. Kelly was at the 21 Club at a given time. It seems the district attorney's office has abandoned more efficient means of fact-finding such as the affidavit."

Nice try, but he still hadn't fazed this kid *juris doctor*. "Mr. Dinsmore, we can spend the entire day in colloquy or we can clear this up . . ."

"There, you see," Dinsmore interrupted, "you use the term 'clear' . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake, Charlie," Byerle snapped, "let's get on with it."

"Yes, Charles," Jay Porter agreed, "let's hear what he has to say."

Dinsmore sat down, making no attempt to hide his irritation.

"Now, Mrs. Pemberton," Ru-

ker said, "tell us of your meeting with Mr. Kelly at 21."

"I wouldn't say it was a *meeting*. I merely said hello in passing."

"Just hello?"

"We discussed his ankle briefly. He walked with the aid of a cane."

"How long were you in the restaurant before Mr. Kelly approached you?"

"A few seconds or so."

"The person at the reservations desk remembers it as a much longer period, long enough for you to make a phone call."

"Oh yes, I was calling Mr. Tierney to find out why he wasn't there, and got no answer. He arrived shortly after."

"During the time you entered 21 and prior to making the phone call, did you notice Mr. Kelly and his companion at Table 3?"

"I am not in the habit of rubbernecking, Mr. Ruker."

"I didn't mean to imply that you were, madam, but since Table 3 is in direct line of sight with the reservations desk, you could hardly miss recognizing a familiar face. In fact, I am given to understand that many celebrities like that table for its high visibility."

"I am not familiar with the tribal beliefs of celebrities, Mr. Ruker. If all these questions are to establish that Mr. Kelly was

with the woman who was killed, I am of no help to you at all. The first time I noticed him was when he came up to me. I don't know if that helps or hurts his case, but it is the truth."

"You can include me in that, too," Buzz Tierney chimed in. "Kelly was with By . . . Mrs. Pemberton when I came into the lobby, so I couldn't know where he was sitting."

"If that's why you got me down here," it was Phil Dunn the sportswriter's turn, "I arrived late and was taken immediately upstairs to the Bottle Room."

"Well, that seems to settle that," Dinsmore said with a sigh of relief. "I can appreciate the district attorney's office wanting to be thorough, but since we can be of no assistance . . ."

Mrs. Pemberton," Ruker played right through the exit speech, "when you were going upstairs, you said to Mr. Tierney, 'You promised it would work,' and then you added, 'Suppose Jay Porter finds out.'"

They couldn't help it. Byerle and Buzz exchanged furtive glances, which we all caught, no one more acutely than Jay Porter.

"I don't remember making

any such statement," Byerle said gamely.

Ruker gave her a sharp jab to set her up for a one-two combination. "Others do remember, and will swear to it. Your statement was remembered verbatim. So what was it that your husband wasn't supposed to know, or find out?"

"Don't answer that, Byerle," Dinsmore was on his feet and angry as hell. "And I want you to listen to me, Jay Porter and Buzz Tierney as well. It's preposterous, but there's the thread of an implication here that Mrs. Pemberton is somehow involved in the death of Gina Velker. All this jabberwocky about being invited here for a chat about meeting Kelly was a ruse, and believe you me, Mr. Ruker, the D.A. will rue this action, if indeed it had his sanction at all."

I wasn't listening to Dinsmore's harangue. I was looking at Jay Porter's face. He stared fixedly at the wall behind Ruker's desk, and I could sense the thought pattern emerging from his brain the same way it had in mine, which went like this:

Tierney and Byerle would like to make permanent whoopee, and *they* concoct the criminal conversation plot. Byerle would then have grounds for a beautiful divorce settlement plus a cut of Gina's take. Poor

Jay Porter's brain was putting together the pieces, and his ever-tightening mouth showed he didn't like it.

Byerle had known he was going to Newport the evening of the storm. She knew he was too much the gentleman to turn Gina out. His own weekend conversations with Gina had told him she wasn't smart enough to dream up the caper, but Byerle and Buzz were. Oh yes, I thought, you're getting the message, Mr. Millionaire.

"You promised me it would work," she had said, and when she saw Gina with me, a pal of her husband, she knew it was trouble. Then, when it started to fall apart, the publicity had turned Gina into a romantic rebel and Gina's husband into bitterness and vengeance, both too dangerous to be alive.

While I'm watching Jay Porter, Ruker had somehow quieted Dinsmore down with a lot of legal mumbo-jumbo and the attorney was saying, "Of course we will answer any question that's germane to the case. Ask if you've got one."

"Mr. Pemberton, you keep a supply of a champagne labeled 'Chateau La Codar 1958' stored at Mr. Kelly's nightclub."

"Yes, I do. It's a private label bottled for me exclusively at my

place in France."

"Is your entire stock kept at Mr. Kelly's?"

"Oh no, I keep some at 21, a few down at Burning Tree, and of course, a case or so at our various *pieds-à-terre*."

"Which do you consider your residence of record, sir?"

"Legally, I suppose it's split between the apartment on Fifth Avenue and the house in Little Neck on the Island. Summers, of course, at Newport, and sometimes the Palm Beach place in winter."

"And you keep La Codar at all these homes?"

"Yes, I don't drink much, but when I do, it's always La Codar so I like to have it available. Oh yes, if it's pertinent, there are always a few bottles on my jet."

"Thank you, sir. And are these bottles numbered sequentially?"

"No. There's no need. I don't inventory it, although Mike at 21 keeps meticulous records, as does Jack McCarthy at Chick Kelly's."

"You understand, Mr. Pemberton," Ruker said, "that a bottle of La Codar carried the poison that killed the Velkers?"

"So I am told. I guess that's why Mr. Kelly is suspect. Something about fingerprints?"

"Yes, that's correct. On the bottle's cardboard sleeve and the wrapping paper, but not on

the bottle itself. On the night of the Velker deaths, you were having a Sea Dart party, as I understand it. Is it possible that one of your guests could have taken a bottle of La Codar with him when he left?"

"I should say quite impossible, Mr. Ruker, because no one left. If you recall, that was the night of the second blizzard, and nothing was moving on Long Island. We simply put everyone up for the night: Mr. Tierney, the boat crew, and a few fellows from the press, like Mr. Dunn here."

"You know, Mr. Ruker," Dinsmore was at it again, "it seems to me that, as a prosecutor, your approach is a bit confused. Mr. Kelly is in custody because of his liaison with the deceased woman, and a bottle of poisoned champagne taken from his own cellar is the vessel of death. Why, then, are we dwelling on a party of people who had no connection with the case, and who, even if they had, could not possibly have gotten to the scene of the crime unless they had wings? I believe that even the gulls were walking that night."

Well, folks, there you have it, and if you missed the essential element that's going to hang Lady Byerle and Buzz

Tierney, it will be clear when you hear what my surprise guy waiting outside has to say. Oh, why make you wait. The surprise guy is Lieutenant Commander Paul Dirinkus of the U.S. Coast Guard, and he is prepared to show on a map that, on the night of the Velker deaths, you *could* get a bottle of poisoned Chateau La Codar from Little Neck, Long Island, on Long Island Sound to 89th Street on the East River by the smoothest, fastest means on earth, a hydroplane. His map shows that the East River is actually a tidal basin for Long Island Sound, on which Little Neck is located.

So, as they say in the detective stories, Tierney had the means, a spare bottle of exclusive champagne, which he or Byerle poisoned; motive, millions in a divorce settlement; and opportunity, a lightning-speed boat piloted by a pro. He docks the Sea Dart at the foot of 89th Street, and goes to the meeting with the Velkers, and gets them to drink the wine he brought with him. Then, to his surprise, he finds my bottle unopened. Byerle probably told him her husband kept Codar '58 at my joint, so he's got one beauty way to hang it on me. Wearing gloves, he just switches the cardboard sleeve, leaves my wrapping paper behind, and

takes the unopened bottle with him, either dumping it on the return trip to Little Neck or putting it into the manse's cellar stock.

Great plan, Byerle! Slick work, Tierney! Too bad you had to bump into Chick Kelly. Rucker was preparing for the *coup de grace* and I was savoring it.

"I know it's a touchy subject, Mr. Dinsmore, but I would still like to know from Mrs. Pemberton what she meant when she said, 'You said it would work. . . . Suppose Jay Porter finds out.' I believe Mr. Summers is prepared to ask her under oath in an open courtroom unless we can find out here and now."

"For God's sake, Buzz," Phil Dunn said, shaking his head, "Why don't you put Mr. Pemberton out of his misery. It will be public knowledge when next week's edition comes out. I went down to the Sea Dart hangar at Little Neck that night of the blizzard and saw for myself."

Ah, glory. Ah, sweet corroboration. An eyewitness to Tierney's death mission departure. 'Tis the luck of the Kellys.

"What is going to be public knowledge?" Jay Porter is incensed. "Buzz, what is this man talking about?"

Buzz looked for help from Byerle and got none. Then he looked at Dunn, and got more

than he asked for.

"Mr. Pemberton," Dunn said, "the big secret these two have kept from the hydroplane racing world is that the Sea Dart, into which you have poured a fortune, is a lemon."

"That's a lie," Byerle screeched. "Daddy's designs will work if we can get the engineering right . . ."

"Mrs. Pemberton, no one had more respect for Skip Dorlan as a racer than I did," Dunn said sincerely, "but as a designer, he was out of his depth. Hell, Buzz, your uncle was killed in a death trap of his own design, and here you two cousins are trying to make a shrine out of a concept that doesn't, and never can, work."

"After the party broke up that night, I went down to the Sea Dart hangar and tried to turn the motors over. You've been taking the boat to all the races and then bowing out with breakdown excuses when all the time the dumb thing doesn't work."

Byerle started to sob and her husband went to comfort her. Inside, I am also sobbing, and not a comforting hand in sight. What is this? *Cousins!* Well, goodbye, love affair, and my motive theory. A boat that doesn't work! Goodbye, opportunity. Now, if I only had a bottle of the means, I could take a

slug and be out of my misery. Ted was squirming in his seat, saying nothing.

From the look I'm getting from Ruker, I can see it's manacle time again, but suddenly there is a commotion at the door and who is it but Tall Tommy. He is accompanied by a dapper dude with a bandit mustache and another guy in a kind of Forest Ranger outfit. Attached to the Ranger is a chunky, darkhaired girl who obviously doesn't like handcuffs any more than I did.

Ted was on his feet and so was Ruker, who said, "What's the meaning of all this?" and Ted is saying, "Attorney Procutto?" and Dinsmore is saying, "What kind of a circus is going on here?"

The dapper one responded to Ted. "Yes, Blaise Procutto, attorney-at-law, with offices in Providence, Rhode Island. Are you Attorney Summers?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid you've made a trip for nothing. You see . . . oh, this is Assistant District Attorney Ruker."

"How are you, Ruker," Procutto said, shaking his hand. "Did some D.A. time myself once. Well, there she is, and here's the confession, and I wish they had had detectives on the Providence force as sharp as Sergeant Thomas Tanuka when

I was with the prosecutor's staff. This fella not only wraps it up, he practically writes your summation to the jury for you."

"Sergeant Tanuka?" Jaffee moves menacingly toward Tall Tommy. "Sergeant of what?"

Meanwhile, Ruker, who had been reading the document that Procutto had handed him, looks up and says, "Later, Lieutenant Jaffee. Attorney Procutto, this is a very detailed statement Miss Banks has made."

"And all of it checks out. This trooper is Lieutenant Matti of the Rhode Island State Police, who worked with Sergeant Tanuka on the investigation. I was instrumental in getting both law agencies together since my offices were used by Miss Banks in her scheme. I'm only sorry that I failed to see through her plot to bilk Mr. Pember-ton."

"Lisa?" Jay Porter said to the woman. For the first time since she entered the room, she raised her head. When she did, we could see how her black eyes crackled with emotion.

"What do you think you ever did for me, you wealthy pig? Pay for the care of a fine man crippled by the bad boat handling of your stupid wife. Guilt money, that's what it was. All you goddamn Newport rich men are the same. So you cripple some poor handyman: toss him

a bone. Send his daughter to secretarial school so she can support his pain-wracked body. That's not even charity, it's an insult. When he is dying, the doctors say he has no spirit to live. *She* took that spirit," her finger pointed to Byerle, "because she is reckless with a boat, and I decided to pay you back for my father after his death. He made me swear revenge. I would have had it, too, if that fool Gina hadn't lost her head to high society."

It was almost ten o'clock before Ruker was through with me, Jack Mac, Ted, and Tall Tommy. He went over the Banks confession point by point, with Tommy filling in his end of it. "The one thing that bugged me all along was that this Gina dame supposedly had the smarts enough to dream up a big-time complicated con, and then kisses it off for Chick. No offense, *amigo*, but a crafty mind does not work in such a manner. So I figure she's a dupe, but whose dupe? The mark's wife? How does she find this dupe, then, want ads? No, there has got to be some connection on the same social level. On my first visit to Procutto's office, I'm struck by this savvy little secretary who hipped the mark to the con in the first place. Not being without charm, I take her to dinner

and find out she went to business school in Boston. Chick had mentioned that Gina was a secretarial school dropout, so I hustle to Boston and find a Gina Tobin who was a classmate of Lisa Banks, and one of the teachers ID's the Gina Velker in a news photo as Gina Tobin.

"With this connection, I am on my way. Banks is a local girl and she keeps close tabs on the caretaker at the mark's house in Newport. She learns the gee is coming up for an inspection. I figure a quick call to New York, a fast shuttle flight and a waiting car, and you have Gina coming in from the snow. The Rhode Island state cops checked the car out. It was rented on Lisa Banks's credit card in Boston. So Chick's hustle turns the dupe's head, and she calls Banks and wants out and threatens to blow the whistle to Pemberton. It's murder time! Banks could have gotten the bottle of champagne from the Newport house or maybe her old man stole it, but she knew it was exclusively Porter's so she does the poison injection trick. I'll bet she nearly died herself when she found another bottle of Codar '58 unopened as she was cleaning things up after killing the Velkers. That's where her lack of social class comes in. What's a small

town secretary know about private stock being kept at restaurants? She must have thought it was given to Gina when she was snowed in.

"Her original plan had been to wipe the poisoned bottle clean of her prints and leave it behind, hoping to implicate Pemberton when the cops traced the private label back to him. Now she thinks she's in clover with a set of his prints on another bottle."

"So why did she just switch the sleeves instead of opening the new bottle, emptying it, and pouring in the remainder of the poisoned wine?"

"But she did change the bottles, Chick!"

"The hell you say, Tall Tommy. There were *no* prints on the bottle the cops found."

Tall Tommy grins me a cat's whisker-licking grin. "And what does a good wine steward do when he takes a bottle out of storage for presentation?"

I looked over at Jack Mac. "You wiped the bottle clean?"

"Just to get rid of the dust, Chick," he said sheepishly. Now he tells me!

"And being so neat, you only held it by the sleeve while wrapping it. So the bottle and sleeve found by the cops were from my cellar, and Lisa took the original with her . . ."

"Leaving the hypo-injected

cork behind her, of course, to make it complete."

"How did you figure it out, Tall Tommy?"

"You just have to understand a liar's mentality, Chick."

It was a few days later—the day the mortgage payment was due—when I sat in the bar lounge waiting for Jay Porter to return any of my many phone calls.

"He won't call," Barry grumped.

"Why not? I kept my end of the deal."

"The hell you did. You tried to pin a murder rap on his wife and her cousin. You're some genius."

"Before Ruker could get to mention the criminal conversation scheme, Dunn blew up all the evidence with the damn boat being a lemon. It was Tall Tommy bringing in the confession that opened up the fact that Gina spent a weekend with Jay Porter."

"Which Mrs. P. couldn't blame him for. It was a scheme. He won't call because he smelled a rat."

A voice says to Cuz, "Metaxa and beer," and I turn to Tall Tommy climbing onto the stool next to mine.

"Hello, *Sergeant Tanuka*," I said.

"You know, this Jaffee char-

acter is still making noise over that. I am on a mission, Chick." He places an envelope on the bar. "It was no easy task, but I got ten iron men for you out of J. P. Pemberton. Five for your mortgage, five for your trouble. Also, stop calling him, he does not like you henceforth."

"La-dee-dah. What did he lay on you for all that detective work, sarge?"

"You are looking at an executive of Pemberton Enterprises."

"Security."

"Hell, no. I'm director of public relations."

"It figures, for a *ligner* of *ligners*," moans Barry.

"So I'm really on the list, huh?"

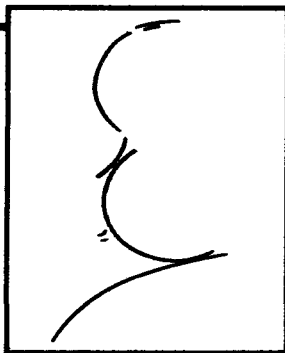
"I'd give it a double yes, Chick. Well, I've got to be on the amble, friends. The public needs relating. By the way, Chick, did you figure out why I was bothered about Gina's not spending the weekend at the Plaza? If she had, by the way, she might still be alive."

"Yeah, I figured maybe she didn't want to cheapen our relationship with a quick shack-up. Sort of old fashioned morality, Tall Tommy, but to tell you the truth, it might have been a lie."

"See, Chick, you're learning all the time." He ankled.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



Summer is the best of times and the worst of times for suspense movie addicts. The theaters are full of escapist and pure entertainment features, including any imports that could be found to fit the bill, but the quality isn't always high.

Hanky Panky

A roll of microfilm, a beautiful girl in danger, and a chance meeting in a cab send this comedy-suspense thriller on its headlong way. The wide-eyed Gene Wilder is the innocent bystander caught up in the action. He and Gilda Radner sometimes push too hard for laughs, but luckily they stick pretty close to the job of working out

who is trying to kill Wilder and why. The who is Richard Widmark, playing a stone-faced, implacable evil genius; for an old fan he somehow lends the proceedings a welcome air of familiarity. The why is left a bit muddled. What's clear, though, is that *Hanky Panky* is the best of the new summer movies.

The Amateur

(See page 73 for a review of the novel, by Robert Littell, on which this movie is based. ED.)

A young expert on ciphers for the CIA is an amateur when it comes to international intrigue. But after his girlfriend is held hostage and assassinated by terrorists, he sets out to stalk



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Griffin O'Neal in *The Escape Artist*.

and kill them. The CIA comes off badly as usual, but this time for doing too little rather than too much. A poor sound track muddles parts of an otherwise well-told cat-and-mouse tale of revenge behind the Iron Curtain.

Diva

The "diva" in the title of this French thriller is an American opera singer. She unknowingly wanders into the center of a web of underworld murder and mayhem. Squint-eyed professional killers are photographed at odd camera angles inside abandoned buildings in obvious imitation of American gangster movies. But going to the revival of an old Hitchcock movie would be preferable to such a mannered homage to the master.

The Escape Artist

Finally, there's *The Escape Artist*, a children's movie distinguished chiefly by what it leaves out. There is no violence, profanity, nudity, mental cruelty, or free-floating cynicism about life in general. The pre-adolescent boy escape artist, played by Griffin O'Neal, straightens out the political corruption in a small town by doing what he knows best—picking locks. Adults would be more comfortable at home with

a good book. But 'tis a far far better thing on a muggy summer evening to take the youngsters out to an Arctic Air Cooled movie palace—or if there are no more of those left in town, to the local triplex.

STILL PLAYING

Deathtrap

Still a good bet is last winter's *Deathtrap*. Out in the fashionable Hamptons a playwright-murderer and his male secretary spend much of their time plotting the perfect, slick mystery drama for Broadway. Actually they are setting deathtraps for one another. This adaptation of the still-running Broadway hit play is appropriately swift-paced, witty, intricately plotted, and professionally if broadly acted by Michael Caine, Christopher Reeve, and Irene Worth.

Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid

Also still playing is *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*, the comedy private-eye spoof featuring clips from old movies. The easy-going atmosphere of summer encourages an indulgent attitude toward the sometimes heavy-handed humor of Carl Reiner and Steve Martin.

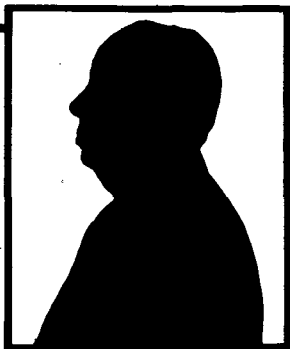


*The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive, 11 W. 53rd Street, New York City;
© 1942 Universal Pictures Company, Inc.*

**Broderick Crawford and Michael Barnitz, aged thirteen months,
in *Butch Minds the Baby*.**

FRAMES OF REFERENCE

by Peter Christian



"Runyonesque" has become a cinematic code word for crime films featuring a sentimental view of mob activity and likeable miscreants—indeed, the same sort of none too honest but amiable heroes **Damon Runyon** wrote about so often in his tales of big-city rackets and scams. Like the Prohibition-weaned stories, the films based on them had an ambivalent attitude towards bootlegging, gambling, and other vices, and their underworld denizens were nearly all—when cornered—redeemable.

Runyon's first major movie success was the story that became *Lady for a Day* (1933). A cheery, rough-edged street vendor, an elderly woman known as "Apple Annie," is transformed into an aristocratic lady by her customers (mostly gamblers who buy her apples "for luck") so that she can attend the wedding of the daughter she has not seen since birth. May Robson played Annie, and Bette Davis recreated the role in 1961 in *Pocketful of Miracles*.

Runyon's next success was even more sentimental, and was re-made *three* times. Shirley Temple was the heroine of 1934's *Little Miss Marker*, a small girl left with a tough bookie (Adolphe Menjou) as an IOU for her father's gambling debt—a debt so large the man is soon murdered for it. Ultimately her sunny ways nearly reform all of New York's gambling underworld. The appealing plot was reworked as *Sorrowful Jones* (1949), with Bob Hope as the bookie, and *Forty Pounds of Trouble* (1963), with Tony Curtis. In the 1980

version, which kept the original title and the Depression setting, a crusty Walter Matthau played the Menjou role.

Several other Runyon stories made their way to the screen in the early thirties. The hero of *Midnight Alibi* (1934), Richard Barthelmess finds himself pursued by gunmen employed by his girl's antagonistic brother, a mob kingpin called Angie the Ox. Escaping over a wall, he stumbles upon a city garden owned by an elderly woman recluse known as the "Old Doll"—and begins a friendship that is surprisingly helpful when, later, he is accused of the Ox's murder. That same year, in *Million Dollar Ransom*, Edward Arnold played another typical Runyon character: a Prohibition kingpin who emerges from prison a few years after Repeal to find that bootlegging is no longer an industry. He helps a rich young playboy friend fake the latter's own kidnapping, but rival gangsters step in and change the kidnap to the real thing.

In the late thirties Runyon collaborated with Howard Lindsay in a crime caper play that had a successful Broadway run and became, as well, a screen hit for 1938. *A Slight Case of Murder* featured Edward G. Robinson as a former beer baron persuaded by his wife to go straight. His reformation is somewhat clouded, however, by his former associates and rivals, who have hidden a corpse in the grounds around Robinson's country estate. The complications are comic and—in a word—Runyonesque. Broderick Crawford and Claire Trevor portrayed the hapless ex-crime boss and his socially-ambitious wife in an equally likeable color remake, *Stop, You're Killing Me!* (1961).

Many other Runyon stories inspired movie versions. *Three Wise Guys* (1936) was a Christmas fable in which a trio of seedy con men assist at a birth. *Johnny One Eye* (1950) is actually a dog who befriends a petty crook. *The Lemon Drop Kid* (1951) starred Bob Hope as a racetrack tout pursued by gangsters to whom he had given a bad tip. Many stories, like *Butch Minds the Baby* (1942), tell of felons who are humanized by a measure of grace. The Runyon touch.

That touch was most memorable in *Guys and Dolls*, the hit Broadway musical fashioned by Abe Burrows from two Runyon stories; it also became a 1955 Samuel Goldwyn film. Sky Master-son, Broadway gambler, participates with his colorful underworld associates in the world's longest-operating floating crap game but finds himself falling under the spell of a woman missionary.

Reformation is waiting in the wings, in the most typical of all screen depictions of the appealing underworld of Damon Runyon.

UNSOLVED

by C. R. Wylie, Jr.

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the Mid-September issue.

Four men were eating dinner together in a restaurant when one of them suddenly struggled to his feet, cried out "I've been poisoned," and fell dead. His companions were arrested on the spot and under questioning made the following statements, exactly one of which is false in each case.

Watts: I didn't do it.
I was sitting next to O'Neil.
We had our usual waiter today.

Rogers: I was sitting across the table from Smith.
We had a new waiter today.
The waiter didn't do it.

O'Neil: Rogers didn't do it.
It was the waiter who poisoned Smith.
Watts lied when he said we had our usual waiter today.

Assuming that only Smith's companions and the waiter are implicated,

Who was the murderer?

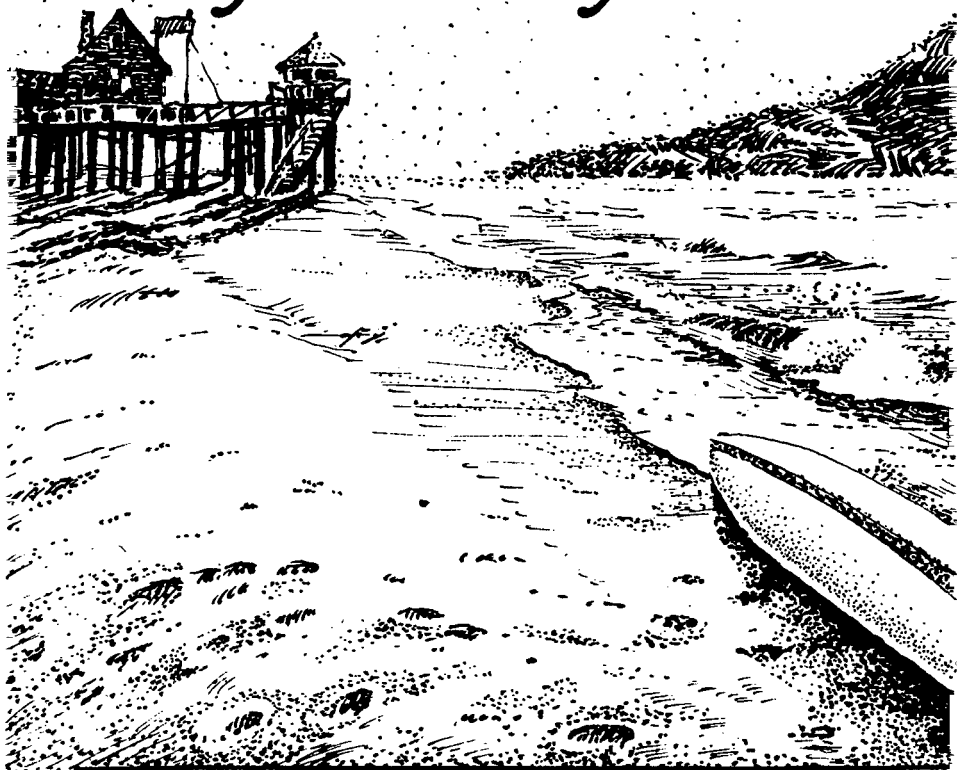
Taken from 101 Puzzles in Thought and Logic by C. R. Wylie, Jr.,
© 1957 by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

See page 153 for the solution to the August puzzle.

FICTION

The SURFBOARI

by E. E. Aydelotte



MURDERS

The first body washed up on a beach just south of the power plant. The second body was found two mornings later, tangled in the pilings beneath the pier. Both victims had been surfers, both wore wetsuits, and both had taken .38 caliber bullets at close range. They had died without witnesses.

The third victim was killed in a more public manner. Johnny Kyte, twenty-six years old, ex-world surfing champion and more recently a manufacturer of surfboards, was shot just north of the city pier as he rode a wave toward the beach. Johnny rose up screaming out

of his surfing crouch, blood spurting from his breast, and then he fell backwards off his surfboard into the boiling whitewater. He resurfaced twice, near one of the concrete pillars that supported the pier, and then he disappeared completely. Although his surfboard washed immediately up on the beach, Johnny's body was not found. Lifeguards and his fellow surfers searched diligently for it, the county sheriff's diving squad spent two days hunting for it, but somehow it eluded discovery. Apparently the undertow had taken the body out for burial into the vast Pacific Ocean.

Illustration by Neal Hughes

The newspapers promptly dubbed the three killings, "The Surfboard Murders."

The state is California, the city is Hovington Beach, and my name is Fred Waddy. I'm a private investigator, licensed by the state and in business for myself seven years now. Most of my business is routine: running down debtors who have skipped, locating runaway children, shadowing unfaithful husbands or wives. I also do quite a bit of insurance work, which is what brought me into this particular case.

The Consolidated-Mutual Insurance Company had written a major policy on Johnny Kyte, a policy that had two important items buried in the legalese of its ten pages. First, the bereaved widow was to receive compensation to the tune of \$350,000. Second, an unusual clause had been included that compelled Consolidated-Mutual to effect payment within fourteen calendar days of the insured's death.

Even in these days of inflated prices, Con-Mutual considered \$350,000 to be a significant sum. They desired that the particulars of the case be verified prior to their settling with the beneficiary. And so it was that,

four days after Johnny's murder, I found myself seated at my desk munching a breakfast of cold pizza and perusing the Kyte file.

Veronica and Johnny had been high school sweethearts. His class had graduated three years before hers and he had immediately pursued his surfing. Within three years he had won every major surfing championship in the world. His style was known for fluid cutbacks and smooth maneuvering, and his slightly duck-footed stance had been copied by young surfers world-wide. He had become a living legend from Hawaii to Australia to his own California. His last (championship) year had been chronicled in a documentary movie, *Outside Curl*, that had been an immense success and was now considered a classic.

A few months after the movie's debut Johnny had come back to California and had married Veronica. Johnny Kyte invested his prize money, his movie royalties, and some income from endorsements into a shop that manufactured surfboards. The Outside Curl brand of boards, bearing Johnny's signature, quickly made him a rich young man. The young couple moved into a lavish new home in Hovington Beach.

Johnny, retired from competitive surfing, had spent the past five years living quietly and running his business. He still surfed regularly, but for pleasure and fitness rather than for competition. He had no close friends.

The day Johnny had been murdered, Veronica Kyte had been sailing their big thirty-six foot boat offshore. Her passion was sailing, she was an expert and had the boat specially rigged for solo operation, although generally she preferred to go out with one or another of her friends. This particular day she went out alone. She did not learn of her husband's death until hours later, after she had docked her boat and had driven home. A police detective had been waiting at her door with the news.

Little progress had been made in the police investigation of the murder. A search had discovered a rifle shell lying on the flat roof of a brick building across the coast road from the Hovington Beach pier. The shell was from a very common make and caliber of rifle bullet and offered no clues. No witnesses had been found who had heard the rifle shot.

My first investigative move was to go see the widow. I expected to find a grieving wife.

Instead, I found Veronica Kyte.

I drove through hot California sunshine to the Kyte house, which was a big, expensive looking affair in an exclusive community south of the power plant. Veronica Kyte met me at the door, a frosty glass in her hand and an alcoholic twinkle in her eye. She wore ornate leather sandals, brief white shorts, and a diaphanous, lacy blouse. Nothing under or over. She flaunted a figure that would defrock a monk. This hardly seemed a mourning widow.

"Can we make it a quick interview?" she asked me after I had explained my mission. "I'm due to meet my girlfriend at the marina for a late luncheon."

I allowed as how we might be able to expedite things. Mrs. Kyte took me into her living room. The furniture was well-crafted teak. We sat opposite one another.

"Margarita?" she asked. I declined the offer. She sipped hers and said, "I love 'em. It's the only drink I can stand when the weather is this warm."

I expressed my condolences regarding her husband's death.

"I miss Johnny very much," she said mechanically.

I asked her the usual questions and learned no more than

had been in the file. Veronica Kyte had no *idea* who had shot her Johnny. Hadn't the newspapers attributed it to one of these psycho killers, the so-called "Surfboard Murderer" who had killed the other two surfers?

I said perhaps that could be. I asked her more questions, without much gain, and then she saw me to her door.

"When," she asked anxiously, "do you think I'll get my insurance check?"

riding, but there were no more than three or four surfers in the water. On a normal day forty or more would have been visible, but obviously most had been scared off by the three shootings.

A tall lifeguard tower stood at the foot of the pier, a building somewhat like an airport's control tower. I climbed the stairs, past a chalkboard sign that posted the wind, tide, and temperature conditions, and entered the glass enclosed

It was a scorching day, with few surfers in the water. Most had been scared off by the shootings.

"Probably soon," I said non-committally, and then I left.

I drove north along the coast road, intending to check in at the Hovington Beach P.D. and touch bases with their investigation of the murder. My route took me past the city pier, where Johnny Kyte had been murdered. On an impulse I pulled my car over, parked, and stepped out to survey the murder spot.

It was a scorching day, despite the slight sea breeze. The break of the surf looked good for

observation booth.

The first lifeguard I spoke to was named Bob. "No, sir," he stated after I had presented my credentials and announced my purpose, "I'm afraid I wasn't working that day, but Vernon here might be able to help you."

Lifeguard Vernon was a nice looking young man, perhaps twenty-three years old, with a deep tan, close-cropped hair, and quite a muscled build. "Yes," he said, "I had duty that day. What would you like to know?"

I asked him to run down his eyewitness account.

"Well let's see," he mused, crinkling his forehead in thought. "It was a clear day with about four foot breakers from out of the northwest. Johnny Kyte was surfing close to the pier—"

"—The best waves for board riding are generally alongside the pier," inserted Bob.

"That's correct," said Vernon. "Anyway, Mr. Waddy, Johnny was down there," he pointed, "about ten feet from the pilings, when he was shot. Johnny draws quite a crowd when he surfs so a lot of people saw him go under.

"I saw him come up twice," Vernon continued, "both times about three feet from that piling." He pointed to one of the barnacle-encrusted pillars that formed the support of the Hovington Beach pier. As our guard tower was offset to the right side of the pier, we could see underneath it slightly.

"How did he look? Was he struggling or just floating?"

"Heck, Mr. Waddy, he was in trouble. He fell in the middle of a set of waves and even a healthy fellow would have had it tough. We have two or three surfers a season fall too close to the pilings and injure themselves. It's rough in the water there."

"Did you hear the shot?"

"No. That's not surprising, though, what with the roar of the breakers."

I asked, "What sort of search did you conduct for the body?"

"We were pretty thorough. We had a surf boat out right away, three lifeguards on paddleboards, and quite a few local surfers helped out. Later on, the county sheriff sent his diving team. They found several beer cans and one diver's swim fin under the pier, but no trace of the body."

"A swim fin?"

"Oh yeah, people lose them all the time in the surf. It's nothing unusual. Here," said Vernon, crouching down and removing a black object from a low shelf. "The sheriff's divers left it with us, in case the person who lost it should come to claim it."

"May I borrow this?" I asked. "I could return it later."

He nodded his assent. I tucked the fin under my arm.

"Isn't it kind of funny that the body hasn't been found?" I asked.

"A little," Vernon agreed, "but remember that the currents around here can do strange things. Two years ago we had a girl drowned whose body didn't wash ashore until thirteen days after her accident. Of course, by

then she wasn't very pretty and—well, anyway, most likely Johnny Kyte's body will show up one of these days."

"Unless the sharks get him," said Bob.

I squinted into the glare coming off the Pacific. "Would either of you boys happen to know anyone who had reason to kill Johnny Kyte? Did he have enemies?"

They both shook their heads no. "He was kind of aloof," said Bob, "but I never heard of him feuding with anyone."

"Unless it was someone who bought one of his surfboards," joked Vernon. Both lifeguards laughed.

"I thought Johnny Kyte's boards were popular?"

"They were when he first marketed them, five years ago," Vernon said. "They sold like hotcakes then; but not any more."

I raised my eyebrows.

"They're too good," he explained. "See, you can design a surfboard in different styles. For instance: stable and fast for big surf; easy handling for novices; or maneuverable for medium surf and competition. Well now, Johnny Kyte was the best cutback man I ever saw on a board. He was quick and had the balance of a cat. He liked a board that would turn on

a dime and he designed his Outside Curl boards around his own surfing style."

Bob cut in. "The problem is, there's only a handful of surfers in the world who can ride like Johnny Kyte. The surfboard he sells is a tough board for the average guy because it gives such a hot ride. It's skittish, I guess you'd say. Johnny sold quite a few of them the first few years, because of his name, but the last couple of years I know for a fact that the line hasn't been very successful. Word got around. You hardly see them any more."

I asked a few more questions and then said goodbye.

"Good luck," Bob told me. "I hope you find this killer."

"Yes," agreed Vernon, "it's been like an empty desert around here since Johnny's shooting. Gives me the willies. Everyone's going way down the coast to surf. We're getting fewer than a tenth of the surfers we normally have. No one wants to be the next Hovington Beach victim."

I walked down off the lifeguard tower and, sweating from the heat, across the coast highway and up to the brick building that had been the rifleman's roost. It was three stories high and about forty years old, with a grocery store downstairs and

rooms "by the day, week, or month" upstairs. I climbed a back stairway to the roof, which I found to be flat, with a solid brick parapet on all sides. Two crumbling lawn chairs showed that the roof was occasionally used for sunbathing.

The view was good. The pier (and Johnny Kyte's death-spot in the surf) was a hundred unobstructed yards away. A marksman using a high-powered rifle equipped with a modern scope might have picked Johnny off from up here. It would have been a difficult shot, though, with the target moving in the surf. The roof's three foot high brick parapet afforded enough concealment to prevent an assassin's being sighted by those below.

I went back downstairs and spoke with the grocery store employees. None of them had heard a shot; and why was I bothering them with questions the police had already asked repeatedly? I left feeling slightly abashed.

The Hovington Beach Dive Shop had one of those bells that tinkled when you opened the door. I sauntered in and looked around, as if shopping. A smiling man, very fit, of middle age with a weathered outdoor-type face

came up to me. A badge on his shirt read, "Max."

"May I be of assistance?" Max inquired.

I showed him the swim fin. "Recognize this?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Sure," he said. "We've sold maybe eight hundred pairs of that brand to scuba divers over the past several years. It's very common. Why do you ask?"

I showed him my credentials and explained that I was investigating the murders of the three surfers.

"Well, I didn't know the other boys," he said thoughtfully, "but I was acquainted with Johnny Kyte. Terrible thing, these killings. It seems like every year the world is more and more filling up with kooks."

"How did you happen to know Johnny Kyte?"

"Johnny? He learned to scuba dive in one of our classes, let's see, four years ago. After that he came in several times a month for his air."

Max explained: "I sold him all his gear: a diving wetsuit, tanks, mask, snorkel, a pair of fins of the brand you're holding there, a buoyancy compensator, oh all the stuff. One of our shop's best selling points is that if you buy everything here, we'll always give your tanks free air refills. It's a promotion

that brings us a lot of business, and it can save a guy a lot of dough if he dives regularly. So Johnny always came here for his air.

"In fact," Max added, suddenly remembering, "I believe that I filled Johnny's tanks just last Wednesday. Give me a minute, please." Max walked to the counter and referred to a ragged notebook. "Yes! The log shows we filled his big single tank at nine A.M. Wednesday morning. Does that mean anything, mister?"

"Maybe," I mused. Wednesday had been the day before Johnny was shot.

Max and I talked swim fins for a bit, then I borrowed his phone and made a call to the Hovington Beach P.D. That done, I thanked Max and walked through brilliant sunshine back to my car. I drove immediately to the marina.

I learned quite a bit poking around the marina. I had a beer with the foreman of the boatyard. I gossiped with clerks at the local grocery. I had a very interesting conversation with the attendant at the fuel dock. I tried to sneak on board the Kytes' big sailboat, but access to its dock was restricted by a gate of cyclone fencing topped by barbed wire. Not wishing for torn trousers and unable to find

anyone to let me in, I put that off for later.

I found a pay telephone and called a banker friend of mine. We talked for several productive minutes. Then, in search of Veronica Kyte, I went up to the marina clubhouse.

After the whitewashing heat of the sun, the clubhouse was wonderfully cool and dim. Veronica was in the lounge, seated next to another young woman and behind a margarita.

"Hello!" she called out to me. "If it isn't my favorite detective! Come have a seat?"

I sat down. Both women smiled at me, a general sort of drinking smile. "Are you bringing me my insurance check?" Veronica asked. She giggled.

"That's not my department," I said. "I have a couple of things to clear up first." I looked significantly at the girlfriend.

"I can take a hint," she said, standing up and gathering her things together from a spare chair. She leaned over and bussed Veronica's cheek. "Keep in touch, 'Ronnie," she said. Veronica nodded.

As soon as we were alone I went straight at her.

"How soon do you leave on your trip, Mrs. Kyte? What ports will you be visiting? Ensenada? La Paz? Puntarenas?"

"I'm sure I don't know what

you mean," she said.

"I think you do. I've been checking around the marina. In the past month you've had your sailboat maintained at the boatyard in preparation for a long voyage. Your galley was fully provisioned from the grocery over there," I gestured out the club's inland-facing window, "and yesterday your tanks were topped off at the fuel dock. I may not be the smartest fellow on this coast, but I think you're going somewhere."

"You certainly do check around," she complained.

"It's my job."

She drew a deep breath, then let it out. "All right," she said. "As soon as I receive my insurance settlement I plan to take a long trip. I want to get away from Hovington Beach. Everything here reminds me of my Johnny. I want to forget everything for a while. Is that so wrong, mister private detective? Is that a crime?"

She stood up as if to leave.

"Sit down," I said.

"I'm going home," she said tartly.

"If you'll sit down," I said, "we'll probably be able to clear up your insurance claim within a short while. There's a man coming over with an official paper regarding your case."

She slowly lowered herself

back into her seat. "We can finish it?" she asked carefully. "And then I'll be given my money?"

I said, "We'll finish it if you'll just wait for this gentleman."

She settled back in. "Would you like a drink?" she asked.

"No, thank you. I have one more question."

"Which is?"

"You seem to live pretty comfortably. I mean, you're barely twenty-three years old, yet you have a big boat, a fancy house, a Mercedes station wagon, and a lot of nice clothes. That's pretty impressive for a person your age."

She said warily, "Johnny's business does okay."

"Does it?" I countered. "Your banker, Mr. Symington, says otherwise. He seems to believe that you and Johnny are close to personal bankruptcy, and he also says that the Outside Curl surfboard company is about to default on a major loan. It appears the company is going belly-up."

"Why did he tell you that? That's privileged! Mr. Symington had no right—!"

"—Oh," I interrupted, "it's all off the record between him and me. I did his family a small favor once and occasionally he helps me out in return. We can get the same data through a for-

mal subpoena, later on."

Veronica Kyte hissed, "I don't see where that information is any business of your insurance company, Mr. Waddy!"

Just then the man we awaited walked into the lounge, stood blinking for a moment as his eyes adjusted to the light level, and came over to our table.

"Veronica Kyte," I said, "may I introduce—"

"I know this man!" she exclaimed. "You're Lieutenant Brill!"

"That's right, ma'am," he said. "I was the officer who had the sad duty of informing you about your husband's death."

Brill turned to me. "I hope to God you know what you're doing, Waddy."

"I do, too. Did you find it?"

"Yep, I did. Spent an hour thumbing through the courthouse records to get it."

"Were you able to complete the other matter?"

"Yes, though I had to track Judge Thompson all over town and across Hovington Golf Links. He thinks our grounds are a little shaky, but he signed them, based on his regard for your judgment. He remembers the way you broke the Symington kidnapping case."

Veronica was shifting her gaze worriedly from Brill to me and back to Brill. "What does

this have to do with my insurance money?" she demanded.

"Everything," I said.

Lieutenant Brill drew some folded papers from his coat's inner pocket. He opened and presented them to Veronica Kyte. "I have warrants here which authorize us to search your sailboat, your motor vehicles, and your residence, Mrs. Kyte. I must request that you accompany us."

The color drained from Veronica Kyte's face. "Search?" she said hoarsely. "What on earth could you be looking for?"

"Your husband has a handgun permit on file at the county courthouse. It was issued for a .38 caliber handgun, the same type of gun that was used to murder the first two surfers. We are looking for that gun."

"B-But surely you c-can't think I killed those boys?" Veronica Kyte stuttered. She commenced to cry.

Brill and I walked Veronica down to the dock between us, steering her with firm hands on her elbows. I removed her key-chain from her purse, opened the gate's padlock, and we went down the ramp onto the dock. A boy doing deck work on another boat stared curiously.

Forty feet from her boat's berth, Veronica suddenly began to scream, "Police! Police!"

She pivoted and tackled Lieutenant Brill. He thudded down to the wooden decking with a very surprised look on his face.

On the Kyte boat, a man's face appeared at the cabin window. A moment later, moving quickly, he came up on deck. He began to cast off the boat's mooring lines.

I sprinted my portly, pizza-eating body down the dock and reached the boat before he could cast off more than one of the four of them. He squared off against me; I grinned and stepped in. He swung a roundhouse right, and I saw that he was nicely coordinated but untrained in boxing. I dropped below its arc and jabbed a tentative left to his face, then two hard rights to his belly. He dropped, gasping, to his knees, held his belly, and retched.

By the time I had my man cuffed, Brill had performed the same chore on Mrs. Kyte. He brought her over to the boat.

"Lieutenant Brill," I said in my most formal voice, "allow me to introduce Johnny Kyte."

A .38 caliber pistol lay on a seat cushion in the cabin. Brill dropped it into a plastic evidence bag. "I'll have this run through a ballistics test tomorrow," he said.

"I want to talk with my lawyer," said Johnny Kyte.

"I know you do," said Brill. "You'll get your chance soon enough."

Brill went off to telephone for a squad car. I sat in the boat's cabin with the two handcuffed Kytes. Sunset would be along soon, but it was still nice to be out of the heat. Veronica lay down on a cushion and turned her face to the wall. Johnny stared back at me insolently.

He was a good looking man, despite the present expression that hardened his features. Whenever he moved I could see hints of the physical grace inherent in his athlete's body.

"So you were going broke," I said.

"Don't you have to read me my rights? I'm not talking!"

"Oh," I said, "I'm not a cop and I don't want your confession. I'm the insurance investigator and my part of this has been completed. I'm asking for my own curiosity. You *were* going broke, right?"

"I make the finest surfboards in the world, but the fools won't buy them any more. They want a Henderson, or a Blue Sea. My boards can surf rings around those."

"You decided," I said, "to run a fraud on your insurance company. You were desperate for

the \$350,000. The first two killings, the real ones, were to establish the mythical 'Surfboard Murderer' and to divert attention away from your insurance claim.

"So twice, in the dim pre-dawn hours on some deserted stretch of beach, you murdered an innocent man who had come down alone before work to get some surfing in. You dumped both bodies into the sea."

His head bent ever so slightly. It might have meant, "Yes," or it might not.

"Then," I plowed on, "you planted a rifle shell on the roof of that brick building, and you cached a bag of scuba equipment underwater, at the base of that piling. The day of your 'murder,' you surfed in, screamed, faked being shot, and disappeared. The lifeguard in the tower saw you resurface twice and thought that was your dying struggle. Actually, you were coming back up for air and to get your bearings on the piling."

I paused but he didn't say anything.

"I'm confused at this point," I admitted, "because more than twenty people swear they saw you get shot. They *saw* blood on your chest!"

"That's simple enough," Johnny said slowly. "It's an old

Hollywood trick I learned from a camera man while they were shooting the *Outside Curl* movie. I just concealed a plastic bag of ketchup in my hand. When I was near the piling where I'd stashed my scuba gear, I screamed to draw attention to myself and clapped my hand to my chest. The bag burst, ketchup spurted, I drew my hand away, and all those folks up on the pier saw 'blood.' Then I fell into the water."

"I see," I said. "And then you followed the piling down and got into your scuba gear while underwater. A difficult task but not impossible. In fact, it's a required part of all scuba classes."

"Your gear on, you swam straight out to sea, a mile or less, where you kept a prearranged rendezvous with your wife and this boat. You climbed up the side of the boat hidden from the beach, and you were home free."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Waddy. Frederick Waddy."

He seemed to be memorizing my face. Crooks do that occasionally, when you've pinched them.

"How'd you figure it out? I thought we had everything covered."

"You nearly did," I said. "But

the lack of a body worried me. Your surfboard had washed immediately ashore, why not your body? Also I didn't like the rifle shot. It was too difficult a shot and no one heard it. It should have been heard. Then, your 'murder' was from long range with a rifle, and was very public while the first two murders were from close range with a pistol and were very secret. The pattern didn't fit. Add to that the fact that your wife was . . . well, she wasn't the world's greatest actress. I started doubting the appearance of things. When the sheriff's divers found your fin, though," I said, "*that* was my big break."

"My fin?"

"The fin you lost. It gave you away, Johnny. I knew that fin *had* to be yours. Scuba divers normally don't dive in that area near the pier because it's all sandy bottom and there's noth-

ing to see. Scuba divers like reefs and coves, places where there's lush undersea life."

"Sure they do," said Johnny Kyte, "but I—"

"So," I plowed on, "I knew any fin lost around the pier would have been a body-surfing fin, a type of fin many people use there. But a body-surfing fin has a distinctly different design, and the sheriff's divers had found a scuba diving fin."

I was insufferably smug. "That fin will send you to jail, Johnny."

"But I've been *trying* to tell you," he protested, "that I didn't lose a fin! Look in that locker there, Waddy!"

I checked the specified locker. It contained Johnny Kyte's diving outfit, including both fins.

"It was *someone else's* fin under the pier," I said slowly, wonderingly. And then I began laughing and couldn't stop.

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ONE WAY TICKET

by Al McGarry

I had been living in the little Mexican pueblo of Cobre for about a year when I first met Jake Gablok. His sudden, unexpected appearance in that remote settlement had practically the same effect on me as the first time I had ever seen a magician pull a rabbit out of a hat, as did his disappearance from the pueblo sometime later.

The word *cobre* means copper and the name came from an old copper mine some four miles north that had been worked out for several years. The settlement had started from the mine workers and their families but as time went on small businesses sprang up, along with some livestock raising, until the present population of about four hundred became pretty much self-sufficient.

A dirt road still went out to the mine and at one time had gone on past to a railroad spur. The first time I rode my horse out there, however, I noticed that a large pile of rock had fallen from the side



Illustration by Julie Hechtlinger

of the dump site and now completely blocked the road so I never tried to ride any farther.

Since I already knew a little Spanish I had chosen Cobre as a good place to write my second novel, the place being quiet, the people friendly, and the prices well below those of the American tourist resorts on the coast. Also, since there was only one road, a bumpy macadam type leading into the settlement, there was little traffic. Therefore I was somewhat surprised one afternoon when I was having a beer in Carlos' cantina to see a car with a Texas license plate pull up in front of the place.

In came this florid-faced, heavy-set American of about forty-five, dressed in gray riding breeches, black shirt, black cowboy boots, and a white Stetson. He marched up to the bar, tossed a dollar bill on the counter, and said to Carlos in a gravelly voice, "You got whisky, *hombre*? You savvy me, huh? You know, tequila."

Carlos gave him a sharp look, then answered in his somewhat accented English, "Yes, señor, I have tequila. Brown or white, which kind did you wish?"

"No difference, it's all crummy stuff anyhow," this guy cracked. At the same moment he noticed me at the table and seeing that I was a fellow countryman he nodded his head towards Carlos and said to me, "What do you know, this *hombre* speaks our lingo. These foreigners are finally beginning to wise up a little."

"You're in his country now," I reminded him. "We're the foreigners, not him."

It never even registered. He picked up his glass of whisky and ambled over to plump his stocky frame in a chair across from mine as though I had invited him over. "Gablok," he announced, sticking out a meaty hand. "Jake Gablok."

"Albert Cannon," I had to tell him in return.

He pushed back the good-guy hat and contemplated me with a pair of watery-blue eyes. "How long you been holed up in this dump, Bert?" he asked.

"About a year," I replied curtly. "Nice quiet little place."

Gablok gulped some whisky and remarked in that hoarse tone of his, "This might be the place I'm looking for. I've got to hole up someplace myself for a while due to a little problem up in the States. Yeah, this could be the place all right." He held up his hand, snapped his fingers at Carlos, and called out, "Two more tequilas, *hombre*. You know, *dos*. One for my friend here."

I shook my head at Carlos and when he brought just one glass Gablok didn't even notice I didn't really want to drink with him.

"The reason I need to hole up," Gablok went on, "is because of an unfortunate misunderstanding with the postal inspectors."

I began to smell something. "Some kind of mail order business, I suppose," I commented mildly.

He glanced over to see that Carlos was busy with a couple of customers, then squinted one of his slightly bloodshot eyes at me. "Well, not exactly. We sent out some literature and the money started rolling in, but on account of the postal inspectors we had to discontinue the venture."

"We?" I asked.

"Yeah, me and Joe Malone. By the way, Bert, I'm going to need a house. You know any place in this burg?"

I knew of only one small adobe on the edge of the village that I told him about. "See Romero at his grocery store," I suggested.

"He takes care of it and he speaks enough English to get by."

"Sounds like what I need," Gablok agreed. "Also, I'm looking for some kind of business deal I can promote when I get back to the States. I'm pretty well fixed now but the money always goes."

"What kind of a business deal?" I asked.

Gablok gave me a sort of knowing grin. "Anything to make money, Bert. You just can't beat money. It's a one way ticket to everything there is, and as long as there are suckers around with money in their pockets I'm willing to help them get rid of it. I've done everything from running scam games at carnivals to card sharking to preaching at revival meetings, and when I was younger I used to clean up the suckers at the pool tables."

"You mentioned preaching. You mean Bible preaching?"

He took a sip of his whisky, set it down. "Yeah, I'm a real bona fide minister, sort of, ordained and all that."

"What seminary did you attend?" I couldn't resist adding, "It takes four years to become an ordained minister."

Gablok looked at me with a tolerant expression. "Not me, Bert. I got mine by mail order. I checked off a few questions about the Bible, sent them fifty dollars, and got my diploma. Then I teamed up with this guy, Joe Malone, from Louisiana and we cleaned up with revival meetings in the rural areas until his wife caught him in the truck trailer with a female sinner he was converting. She owned the big tent and equipment, which she sold, and that put us out of business. Later on Joe and I started this church thing in Texas that got us in trouble."

I just couldn't believe this guy, not that he wasn't telling the truth but that he seemed to think there was nothing wrong with his way of life. I thought of staying to hear what else he would come up with but I had some revising to do on my book so I said something about seeing him around and I left.

I was busy for about a week after that and I had almost forgotten about Gablok until I ran into him again in the cantina. He had already downed a couple of shots of tequila whisky and he welcomed me like we had known each other for years.

"Bert!" he called out in that raspy voice, and motioned me to a chair at his table. "Sit down, I'll buy you a drink. I need somebody to talk to. I don't savvy any of this Mexican lingo going on in here."

I bought myself a beer at the bar and sat down with him. "You still around?" I asked, not too cordially.

"Yeah, I got that place you told me about. Kind of messed up but I got me a cute little Mexican chick to clean it up. She's also going to come in three times a week to do dishes and stuff like that. I'm a lousy housekeeper."

"Who did you get?" I asked as I took a swallow of my beer.

"Little gal named Francesca Barrie or something like that."

"Francesca Ybarra," I corrected him. The Ybarras lived fairly close to me and she had stopped by my place one time to ask if I knew how much it would cost to go to a beauty college in the States. Francesca was about seventeen with the typical long, shiny black hair and matching dark eyes.

"Did you find a business deal yet?" I asked.

Gablok's droopy eyes brightened up a bit. "Well, I was over on the coast yesterday and I met an old retired guy in a bar in the American colony. A few months ago a couple of con men sold him ten thousand dollars' worth of oil stock. Prettiest stock you ever saw, all red and blue with a green border. They even showed him an oil well being drilled and got away with his money before he found out that all the oil in Mexico is nationalized."

"So where do you come in on that?" I asked.

"I gave the guy twenty-five bucks for the whole bundle of stock certificates and when I get back to the States I'll make a nice chunk of dough out of them. Lots of people go for oil stocks, even doctors and lawyers, you'd be surprised. You wait and see, Bert, that stock will turn out to be a one way ticket to a whole new start for me."

"It seems to me," I observed caustically, "that con games are your specialty."

Gablok tossed off the rest of his tequila. "Well," he confided with a twisted grin, "I guess you could say that. But what the hell, it's no worse than some of the stuff they get away with on Wall Street. Actually, everybody I know is working some kind of racket one way or another. Look at all those religious programs they got on TV. Some of those guys are raking in over a million a year. The mailman is loaded down with donations every time he comes around. That's the kind of scam that got me and Joe Malone started on our church project."

"I'll bet that was something," I said.

Gablok motioned to Carlos for another whisky and for once I decided to order the same. I might need it.

"We happened to see this old abandoned church," Gablok went on, "and Joe thought we ought to take some pictures of it and have

a bunch of flyers printed up with some Bible quotations under the pictures. We were asking for donations to refurbish it and start a Friends of Jesus Church."

"Did you do it?"

He took a sip of his whisky. "Sure we did. Then we bought a big computer list in Dallas of known church and charity contributors in three states, names and addresses, the whole bit. They turned out to be mostly rest homes and retirement centers, places like that. Those old people go ape over anything religious and they've got the money what with Social Security and all."

"Then what?" I asked.

"It took us a while to get out the mailings but inside of two months we took in over twenty-six hundred dollars and still had hundreds of flyers still out. Then I got suspicious."

"About what?"

"Well, we had all this mail coming in to an old hotel where we stayed and one day the mailman said the postmaster wanted me to come in and sign some kind of delivery form. It didn't sound just right to me but I didn't say anything to Joe because I might have been wrong so I took him up and I parked in front of the big front window while he went in to ask about it. Sure enough, the postmaster came out of his office with a plainclothes man and they nabbed him. I got out of there fast, hustled back to the hotel, grabbed up the money, and headed for the border."

I set my empty glass down hard on the table. "I suppose that's one way to make a living, if the law doesn't catch up with you."

Gablok considered this a moment. "I suppose I'd rather make it honest but I tried that and there was no money in it. No use working at something that don't pay off."

Because of the size of the pueblo and since Carlos' cantina was about the only place I could relax for a while, I ran into Gablok several times in the next few weeks. I tried to avoid him as much as possible but except for weekends when, by his own admission, he usually went over to Cerritos to a well-known bordello, he would spend a couple of hours in the cantina and I couldn't always ignore him. Anyway, I figured something would catch up with him some day, especially after he told me about his great-aunt.

"Yeah, Bert," he confided to me one day in the cantina, "once you've had a little money and learned how to live you can see how

stupid it is to work. My great-aunt who brought me up worked all her life and saved her money but she didn't know how to enjoy it. She was a widow and she had these three old houses that she owned. She was always scrubbing them up to keep them rented. People would leave them like pigpens and she'd have to clean them all over again. All the money she saved she just kept in a tin box in an old trunk in her closet. She was afraid of another bank failure like they had during the Depression and she was always telling me about the hard times they had then."

"You say you lived with her?"

He took another swallow from his glass, licked a bit of salt he had shaken on the back of his hand, and went on. "Yeah, she took me when I was four, after my mother died. She used to babysit me but I didn't know she was my aunt until the next thing I knew I was living with her. It was just a little rural town in Kansas and I grew up there until the first year of high school when I got restless. My aunt didn't know it but sometimes I used to open up that old trunk and take out the tin box to look at all that money. I thought a few times about skipping out with it but you just can't steal from your own relative, you know."

"No," I replied. "You just can't do a thing like that."

"Then I learned that she really wasn't my great-aunt at all," Gablok went on. "She had known my mother for a long time and when she asked to bring me up the local judge went along with it. When I learned all about that I decided to really cut out, and when I did I took the money because after all she wasn't really any relation and besides, for all the good it was doing her it might just as well have been pieces of cut-up newspaper."

"You didn't really spend it, did you?"

He gazed at me with a bleary, surprised expression. "Well, sure, and you'd never believe there was over twelve thousand dollars in that tin box. For over a year I lived it up from Florida to California and during that time I learned how to enjoy life. That's when I decided that money really was a one way ticket to anything you want, but by then I was broke so I joined up with a big traveling carnival. It didn't take the manager long to see that I was a pretty sharp kid and before long he had me operating some of his scams. Later on I began operating for myself and for years I cleaned out the yokels good until too many sheriffs got into the act."

He looked at his watch and said something about getting home to see if Francesca had cleaned up the place yet, then got up to

make his way unsteadily out the door. When Carlos came to pick up the glasses I couldn't hold back any longer.

"Carlos," I exploded in disgust, "is there any law in Mexico against shooting a man who is just no damned good?"

Carlos glanced towards the door. "Do not worry yourself with him, Alberto. I think pretty soon he leave."

I did not get back to the cantina for several days after that and the first thing Carlos said was that he was sure Gablok was really leaving. "He get his car fixed at Robles' garage and he tell my friend Robles that he be glad when he get back where they have somebody who know how to do it better. But my friend, Robles, he know, too. If he fix it, he fix it right."

"I'm sure he did," I agreed. I had a couple of beers and killed some time until the heat of the sun was pretty well gone and then walked home. Darkness was coming on early now and although I was sure I had been typing for hours it was only a little after ten o'clock when I heard a loud knock at my door. It was Padre Guillermo and he was so excited he could hardly speak his usually good English.

"Francesca!" he exclaimed. "That man, Gablok, he get drunk and try to attack her when she go to clean up the dishes. He tear off her clothes and she get some big bruise on her before she get away from him. She run all the way home crying and is what you call hysterics. Please, Señor Cannon, you have car and I ask you that we go quickly to Los Pinos to the *policia* there to tell them."

There were probably two dozen phones in the pueblo but the service was so bad I had to admit it would be almost as quick to drive to the *federalista* station eight miles away to make the report.

"Where is Gablok now?" I asked as we headed out to the macadam road.

"Francesca's father and brother went with guns to kill him but he was gone, for which I am glad for them, but this man must not do this thing and get away for nothing."

"He'll head for the border," I predicted, "and he is probably already past Los Pinos. It's almost too bad that Francesca's father and brother didn't get to him first."

"Oh, no, señor," the padre remonstrated. "To shoot him, no, but for the law to do something, yes."

We made pretty good time to Los Pinos and with Padre Guillermo's help in translation I gave the night officer a description of

Gablok's car as well as a couple of numbers I remembered on his Texas license plate. With this information the officer said he would notify the nearest port of entry and send someone out to talk with the Ybarra family the first thing in the morning.

"He will not get away from the *policia* now," Padre Guillermo commented confidently on the way back. "This is a good thing you do for us, Señor Cannon."

But get away Gablok did because when I checked with the padre next day he said that in spite of a close watch on all the port of entry roads the police had seen no sign of him. It was still another day after that when in the afternoon I went to Carlos' cantina to cool off a while. As I walked in I said to Carlos, "I guess you know about Jake Gablok getting into trouble."

Carlos nodded but I noticed that he seemed uneasy about something. He picked up a damp rag and began wiping off the top of the bar before answering and even then he did not look directly at me. "Sí, señor, I know. My friend Paco Ybarra come in right away looking with gun. I tell him I not see Gablok but soon when Paco leave Gablok come in."

"In here!" I exclaimed in surprise.

Carlos continued to wipe the already clean bar. "He very drunk and he stand like you right there."

"Then what?" I pressed him.

Carlos put the rag down and began to rinse out some beer glasses stacked behind the bar. "He tell me he get very important call from the States to go there right now. He tell me he has big hurry but he do not wish to go by the main road so he want to know if I know a cut short."

"Short cut," I corrected him. Carlos nodded, repeated the word correctly, then went on. "I tell him no person know this but me but because he is good customer I tell him how to go."

"You did what!" I exclaimed so loudly that four of the local patrons at a nearby table looked at us momentarily to see if we were having an argument.

Carlos turned away to wipe his hands dry on a towel, then turned back to start rinsing the same glasses over again. "I tell him he must drive very fast because it look like rain and the place I tell him get very much mud very quick, then he go."

I let go with a few English cuss words that I wished I knew in Spanish but Carlos got the point. He poured out an extra large shot of tequila and placed it on the bar in front of me. "For nothing,"

he said, and picked up the bar rag again.

"Look, Carlos," I said, "I know you have a good heart and all that but I think you may have to do a bit of explaining to Padre Guillermo about this. He wanted that man brought to justice."

"I know," Carlos admitted sadly, "you are right, señor."

As I walked home I noted the typical clear blue sky. It hadn't rained for weeks, or at least I didn't remember any rain.

Somehow I just didn't feel like typing any more that day so I decided I would saddle up my horse and take my usual ride out to the old copper mine. I had cantered my mount for about three miles when I caught the gleam of metal up ahead in the lowering sun. I spurred my horse to a gallop and soon recognized it for what it was. Gablok's car was still on its wheels but the radiator had been pushed back over the motor and the hood was crumpled against the shattered windshield, the result of a head-on collision with the fallen rock from the mine dump. The scene told a mute story of a drunken driver at night going at high speed down a dead-end road.

I dismounted to look closer and found Gablok slumped inside, pinned against the steering wheel. There was dried blood all over the shattered glass and the front seat as well, and on the floor in the back a suitcase had burst open to spill out a bundle of soiled underclothes intermingled with a profusion of pretty red and blue and green oil stock certificates scattered all about. I took another long look at Gablok's body and I couldn't help thinking that whatever place he was going in the afterlife, Carlos had without doubt finally furnished him with a one way ticket.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Butch Mind



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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the Baby

by Damon Runyon

One evening along about seven o'clock I am sitting in Mindy's restaurant putting on the gefillte fish, which is a dish I am very fond of, when in comes three parties from Brooklyn wearing caps as follows: Harry the Horse, Little Isadore, and Spanish John.

Now these parties are not such parties as I will care to have much truck with, because I often hear rumors about them that are very discreditable, even if the rumors are not true. In fact, I hear that many citizens of Brooklyn will be very glad indeed to see Harry the Horse, Little Isadore, and Spanish John move away from there, as they are always doing something that is considered a knock to the community, such as robbing people, or maybe shooting or stabbing them, and throwing pineapples, and carrying on generally.

I am really much surprised to see these parties on Broadway, as it is well known that the Broadway coppers just naturally love to shove such parties around, but here they are in Mindy's, and there I am, so of course I give them a very large hello, as I never wish to seem inhospitable, even to Brooklyn parties. Right away they come over to my table and sit down, and Little Isadore reaches out and spears himself

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a big hunk of my gefillte fish with his fingers, but I overlook this, as I am using the only knife on the table.

Then they all sit there looking at me without saying anything, and the way they look at me makes me very nervous indeed. Finally I figure that maybe they are a little embarrassed being in a high-class spot such as Mindy's, with legitimate people around and about, so I say to them, very polite: "It is a nice night."

"What is nice about it?" asks Harry the Horse, who is a thin man with a sharp face and sharp eyes.

Well, now that it is put up to me in this way, I can see there is nothing so nice about the night, at that, so I try to think of something else jolly to say, while Little Isadore keeps spearing at my gefillte fish with his fingers, and Spanish John nabs one of my potatoes.

"Where does Big Butch live?" Harry the Horse asks.

"Big Butch?" I say, as if I never hear the name before in my life, because in this man's town it is never a good idea to answer any question without thinking it over, as some time you may give the right answer to the wrong guy, or the wrong answer to the right guy. "Where does Big Butch live?" I ask them again.

"Yes, where does he live?" Harry the Horse says, very impatient. "We wish you to take us to him."

"Now wait a minute, Harry," I say, and I am now more nervous than somewhat. "I am not sure I remember the exact house Big Butch lives in, and furthermore I am not sure Big Butch will care to have me bringing people to see him, especially three at a time, and especially from Brooklyn. You know Big Butch has a very bad disposition, and there is no telling what he may say to me if he does not like the idea of me taking you to him."

"Everything is very kosher," Harry the Horse says. "You need not be afraid of anything whatever. We have a business proposition for Big Butch. It means a nice score for him, so you take us to him at once, or the chances are I will have to put the arm on somebody around here."

Well, as the only one around there for him to put the arm on at this time seems to be me, I can see where it will be good policy for me to take these parties to Big Butch, especially as the last of my gefillte fish is just going down Little Isadore's gullet, and Spanish John is finishing up my potatoes, and is dunking a piece of rye bread in my coffee, so there is nothing more for me to eat.

So I lead them over into West Forty-ninth Street, near Tenth Avenue, where Big Butch lives on the ground floor of an old brown-

stone-front house, and who is sitting out on the stoop but Big Butch himself. In fact, everybody in the neighborhood is sitting out on the front stoops over there, including women and children, because sitting out on the front stoops is quite a custom in this section.

Big Butch is peeled down to his undershirt and pants, and he has no shoes on his feet, as Big Butch is a guy who likes his comfort. Furthermore, he is smoking a cigar, and laid out on the stoop beside him on a blanket is a little baby with not much clothes on. This baby seems to be asleep, and every now and then Big Butch fans it with a folded newspaper to shoo away the mosquitoes that wish to nibble on the baby. These mosquitoes come across the river from the Jersey side on hot nights and they seem to be very fond of babies.

"Hello, Butch," I say, as we stop in front of the stoop.

"Sh-h-h-h!" Butch says, pointing at the baby, and making more noise with his shush than an engine blowing off steam. Then he gets up and tiptoes down to the sidewalk where we are standing, and I am hoping that Butch feels all right, because when Butch does not feel so good he is apt to be very short with one and all. He is a guy of maybe six foot two and a couple of feet wide, and he has big hairy hands and a mean look.

In fact, Big Butch is known all over this man's town as a guy you must not monkey with in any respect, so it takes plenty of weight off of me when I see that he seems to know the parties from Brooklyn, and nods at them very friendly, especially at Harry the Horse. And right away Harry states a most surprising proposition to Big Butch.

It seems that there is a big coal company which has an office in an old building down in West Eighteenth Street, and in this office is a safe, and in this safe is the company payroll of twenty thousand dollars cash money. Harry the Horse knows the money is there because a personal friend of his who is the paymaster for the company puts it there late this very afternoon.

It seems that the paymaster enters into a dicker with Harry the Horse and Little Isadore and Spanish John for them to slug him while he is carrying the payroll from the bank to the office in the afternoon, but something happens that they miss connections on the exact spot, so the paymaster has to carry the sugar on to the office without being slugged, and there it is now in two fat bundles.

Personally it seems to me as I listen to Harry's story that the paymaster must be a very dishonest character to be making deals to hold still while he is being slugged and the company's sugar

taken away from him, but of course it is none of my business, so I take no part in the conversation.

Well, it seems that Harry the Horse and Little Isadore and Spanish John wish to get the money out of the safe, but none of them knows anything about opening safes, and while they are standing around over in Brooklyn talking over what is to be done in this emergency Harry suddenly remembers that Big Butch is once in the business of opening safes for a living.

In fact, I hear afterwards that Big Butch is considered the best safe opener east of the Mississippi River in his day, but the law finally takes to sending him to Sing Sing for opening these safes, and after he is in and out of Sing Sing three different times for opening safes Butch gets sick and tired of the place, especially as they pass what is called the Baumes Law in New York, which is a law that says if a guy is sent to Sing Sing four times hand running, he must stay there the rest of his life, without any argument about it.

So Big Butch gives up opening safes for a living, and goes into business in a small way, such as running beer, and handling a little scotch now and then, and becomes an honest citizen. Furthermore, he marries one of the neighbor's children over on the West Side by the name of Mary Murphy, and I judge the baby on this stoop comes of this marriage between Big Butch and Mary because I can see that it is a very homely baby, indeed. Still, I never see many babies that I consider rose geraniums for looks, anyway.

Well, it finally comes out that the idea of Harry the Horse and Little Isadore and Spanish John is to get Big Butch to open the coal company's safe and take the payroll money out, and they are willing to give him fifty percent of the money for his bother, taking fifty percent for themselves for finding the plant, and paying all the overhead, such as the paymaster, out of their bit, which strikes me as a pretty fair sort of deal for Big Butch. But Butch only shakes his head.

"It is old fashioned stuff," Butch says. "Nobody opens pete boxes for a living any more. They make the boxes too good, and they are all wired up with alarms and are a lot of trouble generally. I am in a legitimate business now and going along. You boys know I cannot stand another fall, what with being away three times already, and in addition to this I must mind the baby. My old lady goes to Mrs. Clancy's wake tonight up in the Bronx, and the chances are she will be there all night, as she is very fond of wakes, so I

must mind little John Ignatius Junior."

"Listen, Butch," Harry the Horse says, "this is a very soft pete. It is old fashioned, and you can open it with a toothpick. There are no wires on it, because they never put more than a dime in it before in years. It just happens they have to put the twenty G's in it tonight because my pal the paymaster makes it a point not to get back from the jug with the scratch in time to pay off today, especially after he sees we miss out on him. It is the softest touch you will ever know, and where can a guy pick up ten G's like this?"

I can see that Big Butch is thinking the ten G's over very seriously, at that, because in these times nobody can afford to pass up ten G's, especially a guy in the beer business, which is very, very tough just now. But finally he shakes his head again and says like this:

"No," he says, "I must let it go, because I must mind the baby. My old lady is very, very particular about this, and I dast not leave little John Ignatius Junior for a minute. If Mary comes home and finds I am not minding the baby she will put the blast on me plenty. I like to turn a few honest bobs now and then as well as anybody, but," Butch says, "John Ignatius Junior comes first with me."

Then he turns away and goes back to the stoop as much as to say he is through arguing, and sits down beside John Ignatius Junior again just in time to keep a mosquito from carrying off one of John's legs. Anybody can see that Big Butch is very fond of this baby, though personally I will not give you a dime a dozen for babies, male and female.

Well, Harry the Horse and Little Isadore and Spanish John are very much disappointed, and stand around talking among themselves, and paying no attention to me, when all of a sudden Spanish John, who never has much to say up to this time, seems to have a bright idea. He talks to Harry and Isadore, and they get all pleased up over what he has to say, and finally Harry goes to Big Butch.

"Sh-h-h-h!" Big Butch says, pointing to the baby as Harry opens his mouth.

"Listen, Butch," Harry says in a whisper, "we can take the baby with us, and you can mind it and work, too."

"Why," Big Butch whispers back, "this is quite an idea indeed. Let us go into the house and talk things over."

So he picks up the baby and leads us into his joint, and gets out some pretty fair beer, though it is needled a little, at that, and we sit around the kitchen chewing the fat in whispers. There is a crib

in the kitchen, and Butch puts the baby in his crib, and it keeps on snoozing away first rate while we are talking. In fact, it is sleeping so sound that I am commencing to figure that Butch must give it some of the needled beer he is feeding us, because I am feeling a little dopey myself.

Finally Butch says that as long as he can take John Ignatius Junior with him he sees no reason why he shall not go and open the safe for them, only he says he must have five percent more to put in the baby's bank when he gets back, so as to round himself up with his everloving wife in case of a beef from her over keeping the baby out in the night air. Harry the Horse says he considers this extra five percent a little strong, but Spanish John, who seems to be a very square guy, says that after all it is only fair to cut the baby in if it is to be with them when they are making the score, and Little Isadore seems to think this is all right, too. So Harry the Horse gives in, and says five percent it is.

Well, as they do not wish to start out until after midnight, and as there is plenty of time, Big Butch gets out some more needled beer, and then he goes looking for the tools with which he opens safes, and which he says he does not see since the day John Ignatius Junior is born, and he gets them out to build the crib.

Now this is a good time for me to bid one and all farewell, and what keeps me there is something I cannot tell you to this day, because personally I never before have any idea of taking part in a safe opening, especially with a baby, as I consider such actions very dishonorable. When I come to think things over afterwards, the only thing I can figure is the needled beer, but I wish to say I am really very much surprised at myself when I find myself in a taxicab along about one o'clock in the morning with these Brooklyn parties and Big Butch and the baby.

Butch has John Ignatius Junior rolled up in a blanket, and John is still pounding his ear. Butch has a satchel of tools, and what looks to me like a big flat book, and just before we leave the house Butch hands me a package and tells me to be very careful with it. He gives Little Isadore a smaller package, which Isadore shoves into his pistol pocket, and when Isadore sits down in the taxi something goes wa-wa, like a sheep, and Big Butch becomes very indignant because it seems Isadore is sitting on John Ignatius Junior's doll, which says "Mamma" when you squeeze it.

It seems Big Butch figures that John Ignatius Junior may wish something to play with in case he wakes up, and it is a good thing for Little Isadore that the mamma doll is not squashed so it cannot

say "Mamma" any more, or the chances are Little Isadore will get a good bust in the snoot.

We let the taxicab go a block away from the spot we are headed for in West Eighteenth Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, and walk the rest of the way two by two. I walk with Big Butch, carrying my package, and Butch is lugging the baby and his satchel and the flat thing that looks like a book. It is so quiet down in West Eighteenth Street at such an hour that you can hear yourself think, and in fact I hear myself thinking very plain that I am a big sap to be on a job like this, especially with a baby, but I keep going just the same, which shows you what a very big sap I am, indeed.

There are very few people in West Eighteenth Street when we get there, and one of them is a fat guy who is leaning against a building almost in the center of the block, and who takes a walk for himself as soon as he sees us. It seems that this fat guy is the watchman at the coal company's office and is also a personal friend of Harry the Horse, which is why he takes the walk when he sees us coming.

It is agreed before we leave Big Butch's house that Harry the Horse and Spanish John are to stay outside the place as lookouts, while Big Butch is inside opening the safe, and that Little Isadore is to go with Butch. Nothing whatever is said by anybody about where I am to be at any time, and I can see that, no matter where I am, I will still be an outsider, but, as Butch gives me the package to carry, I figure he wishes me to remain with him.

It is no bother at all getting into the office of the coal company, which is on the ground floor, because it seems the watchman leaves the front door open, this watchman being a most obliging guy, indeed. In fact he is so obliging that by and by he comes back and lets Harry the Horse and Spanish John tie him up good and tight, and stick a handkerchief in his mouth and chuck him in an areaway next to the office, so nobody will think he has anything to do with opening the safe in case anybody comes around asking.

The office looks out on the street, and the safe that Harry the Horse and Little Isadore and Spanish John wish Big Butch to open is standing up against the rear wall of the office facing the street windows. There is one little electric light burning very dim over the safe so that when anybody walks past the place outside, such as a watchman, they can look in through the window and see the safe at all times, unless they are blind. It is not a tall safe, and it is not a big safe, and I can see Big Butch grin when he sees it, so

I figure this safe is not much of a safe, just as Harry the Horse claims.

Well, as soon as Big Butch and the baby and Little Isadore and me get into the office, Big Butch steps over to the safe and unfolds what I think is the big flat book, and what is it but a sort of screen painted on one side to look exactly like the front of a safe. Big Butch stands this screen up on the floor in front of the real safe, leaving plenty of space in between, the idea being that the screen will keep anyone passing in the street outside from seeing Butch while he is opening the safe, because when a man is opening a safe he needs all the privacy he can get.

Big Butch lays John Ignatius Junior down on the floor on the blanket behind the phony safe front and takes his tools out of the satchel and starts to work opening the safe, while Little Isadore and me get back in a corner where it is dark, because there is not room for all of us back of the screen. However, we can see what Big Butch is doing, and I wish to say while I never before see a professional safe opener at work, and never wish to see another, this Butch handles himself like a real artist.

He starts drilling into the safe around the combination lock, working very fast and very quiet, when all of a sudden what happens but John Ignatius Junior sits up on the blanket and lets out a squall. Naturally this is most disquieting to me, and personally I am in favor of beaming John Ignatius Junior with something to make him keep still, because I am nervous enough as it is. But the squalling does not seem to bother Big Butch. He lays down his tools and picks up John Ignatius Junior and starts whispering, "There, there, there, my itty oddleums. Da-dad is here."

Well, this sounds very nonsensical to me in such a situation, and it makes no impression whatever on John Ignatius Junior. He keeps on squalling, and I judge he is squalling pretty loud because I see Harry the Horse and Spanish John both walk past the window and look in very anxious. Big Butch jiggles John Ignatius Junior up and down and keeps whispering baby talk to him, which sounds very undignified coming from a high-class safe opener, and finally Butch whispers to me to hand him the package I am carrying.

He opens the package, and what is in it but a baby's nursing bottle full of milk. Moreover, there is a little tin stew pan, and Butch hands the pan to me and whispers to me to find a water tap somewhere in the joint and fill the pan with water. So I go stumbling around in the dark in a room behind the office and bark my shins several times before I find a tap and fill the pan. I take it

back to Big Butch, and he squats there with the baby on one arm, and gets a tin of what is called canned heat out of the package, and lights this canned heat with his cigar lighter, and starts heating the pan of water with the nursing bottle in it.

Big Butch keeps sticking his finger in the pan of water while it is heating, and by and by he puts the rubber nipple of the nursing bottle in his mouth and takes a pull at it to see if the milk is warm enough, just like I see dolls who have babies do. Apparently the milk is okay, as Butch hands the bottle to John Ignatius Junior, who grabs hold of it with both hands and starts sucking on the business end. Naturally he has to stop squalling, and Big Butch goes to work on the safe again, with John Ignatius Junior sitting on the blanket, pulling on the bottle and looking wiser than a treeful of owls.

It seems the safe is either a tougher job than anybody figures, or Big Butch's tools are not so good, what with being old and rusty and used for building baby cribs, because he breaks a couple of drills and works himself up into quite a sweat without getting anywhere. Butch afterwards explains to me that he is one of the first guys in this country to open safes without explosives, but he says to do this work properly you have to know the safes so as to drill to the tumblers of the lock just right, and it seems that this particular safe is a new type to him, even if it is old, and he is out of practice.

Well, in the meantime John Ignatius Junior finishes his bottle and starts mumbling again, and Big Butch gives him a tool to play with, and finally Butch needs this tool and tries to take it away from John Ignatius Junior, and the baby lets out such a squawk that Butch has to let him keep it until he can sneak it away from him, and this causes more delay.

Finally Big Butch gives up trying to drill the safe open, and he whispers to us that he will have to put a little shot in it to loosen up the lock, which is all right with us, because we are getting tired of hanging around and listening to John Ignatius Junior's glugging. As far as I am personally concerned, I am wishing I am home in bed.

Well, Butch starts pawing through his satchel looking for something and it seems that what he is looking for is a little bottle of some kind of explosive with which to shake the lock on the safe up some, and at first he cannot find this bottle, but finally he discovers that John Ignatius Junior has it and is gnawing at the cork, and Butch has quite a battle making John Ignatius Junior give it up.

Anyway, he fixes the explosive in one of the holes he drills near the combination lock on the safe, and then he puts in a fuse, and just before he touches off the fuse Butch picks up John Ignatius Junior and hands him to Little Isadore, and tells us to go into the room behind the office. John Ignatius Junior does not seem to care for Little Isadore, and I do not blame him, at that, because he starts to squirm around quite some in Isadore's arms and lets out a squall, but all of a sudden he becomes very quiet indeed, and, while I am not able to prove it, something tells me that Little Isadore has his hand over John Ignatius Junior's mouth.

Well, Big Butch joins us right away in the back room, and sound comes out of John Ignatius Junior again as Butch takes him from Little Isadore, and I am thinking that it is a good thing for Isadore that the baby cannot tell Big Butch what Isadore does to him.

"I put in just a little bit of a shot," Big Butch says, "and it will not make any more noise than snapping your fingers."

But a second later there is a big whoom from the office, and the whole joint shakes, and John Ignatius Junior laughs right out loud. The chances are he thinks it is the Fourth of July.

"I guess maybe I put in too big a charge," Big Butch says, and then he rushes into the office with Little Isadore and me after him, and John Ignatius Junior still laughing very heartily for a small baby. The door of the safe is swinging loose, and the whole joint looks somewhat wrecked, but Big Butch loses no time in getting his dukes into the safe and grabbing out two bundles of cash money, which he sticks inside his shirt.

As we go into the street Harry the Horse and Spanish John come running up much excited, and Harry says to Big Butch like this:

"What are you trying to do," he says, "wake up the whole town?"

"Well," Butch says, "I guess maybe the charge is too strong, at that, but nobody seems to be coming, so you and Spanish John walk over to Eighth Avenue, and the rest of us will walk to Seventh, and if you go along quiet, like people minding their own business, it will be all right."

But I judge Little Isadore is tired of John Ignatius Junior's company by this time, because he says he will go with Harry the Horse and Spanish John, and this leaves Big Butch and John Ignatius Junior and me to go the other way. So we start moving, and all of a sudden two cops come tearing around the corner toward which Harry and Isadore and Spanish John are going. The chances are the cops hear the earthquake Big Butch lets off and are coming to investigate.

But the chances are, too, that if Harry the Horse and the other two keep on walking along very quietly like Butch tells them to, the coppers will pass them up entirely, because it is not likely that coppers will figure anybody to be opening safes with explosives in this neighborhood. But the minute Harry the Horse sees the coppers he loses his nut, and he outs with the old equalizer and starts blasting away, and what does Spanish John do but get his out, too, and open up.

The next thing anybody knows, the two coppers are down on the ground with slugs in them, but other coppers are coming from every which direction, blowing whistles and doing a little blasting themselves, and there is plenty of excitement, especially when the coppers who are not chasing Harry the Horse and Little Isadore and Spanish John start poking around the neighborhood and find Harry's pal, the watchman, all tied up nice and tight where Harry leaves him, and the watchman explains that some scoundrels blow open the safe he is watching.

All this time Big Butch and me are walking in the other direction toward Seventh Avenue, and Big Butch has John Ignatius in his arms, and John Ignatius is now squalling very loud, indeed. The chances are he is still thinking of the big whoom back there which tickles him so and is wishing to hear some more whooms. Anyway, he is beating his own best record for squalling, and as we go walking along Big Butch says to me like this:

"I dast not run," he says, "because if any coppers see me running they will start popping at me and maybe hit John Ignatius Junior, and besides running will joggle the milk up in him and make him sick. My old lady always warns me never to joggle John Ignatius Junior when he is full of milk."

"Well, Butch," I say, "there is no milk in me, and I do not care if I am joggled up, so if you do not mind, I will start doing a piece of running at the next corner."

But just then around the corner of Seventh Avenue toward which we are headed come two or three coppers with a big fat sergeant with them, and one of the coppers, who is half out of breath as if he has been doing plenty of sprinting, is explaining to the sergeant that somebody blows a safe down the street and shoots a couple of coppers in the getaway.

And there is Big Butch, with John Ignatius Junior in his arms and twenty G's in his shirt front and a tough record behind him, walking right up to them.

I am feeling very sorry, indeed, for Big Butch, and very sorry for

myself, too, and I am saying to myself that if I get out of this I will never associate with anyone but ministers of the gospel as long as I live. I can remember thinking that I am getting a better break than Butch, at that, because I will not have to go to Sing Sing for the rest of my life, like him, and I also remember wondering what they will give John Ignatius Junior, who is still tearing off these squalls, with Big Butch saying: "There, there, there, Daddy's itty woogleums." Then I hear one of the coppers say to the fat sergeant: "We better nail these guys. They may be in on this."

Well, I can see it is goodbye to Butch and John Ignatius Junior and me, as the fat sergeant steps up to Big Butch, but instead of putting the arm on Butch, the fat sergeant only points at John Ignatius Junior and asks very sympathetic: "Teeth?"

"No," Big Butch says. "Not teeth. Colic. I just get the doctor here out of bed to do something for him, and we are going to a drugstore to get some medicine."

Well, naturally I am very much surprised at this statement, because of course I am not a doctor, and if John Ignatius Junior has colic it serves him right, but I am only hoping they do not ask for my degree, when the fat sergeant says: "Too bad. I know what it is. I got three of them at home. But," he says, "it acts more like it is teeth than colic."

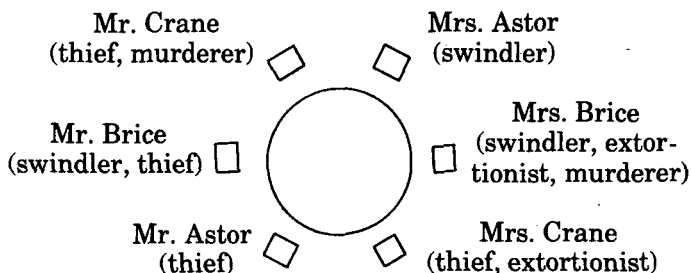
Then as Big Butch and John Ignatius Junior and me go on about our business I hear the fat sergeant say to the copper, very sarcastic: "Yea, of course a guy is out blowing safes with a baby in his arms! You will make a great detective, you will!"

I do not see Big Butch for several days after I learn that Harry the Horse and Little Isadore and Spanish John get back to Brooklyn all right, except they are a little nicked up here and there from the slugs the coppers toss at them, while the coppers they clip are not damaged so very much. Furthermore, the chances are I will not see Big Butch for several years, if it is left to me, but he comes looking for me one night, and he seems to be all pleased up about something.

"Say," Big Butch says to me, "you know I never give a copper credit for knowing any too much about anything, but I wish to say that this fat sergeant we run into the other night is a very, very smart duck. He is right about it being teeth that is ailing John Ignatius Junior, for what happens yesterday but John cuts in his first tooth."

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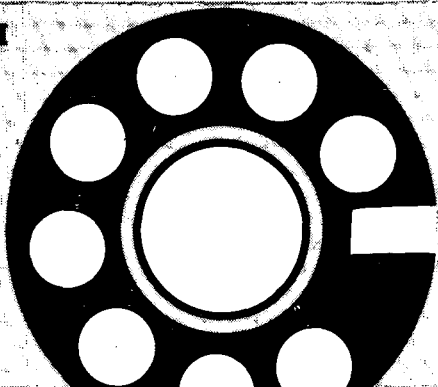


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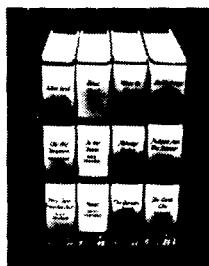
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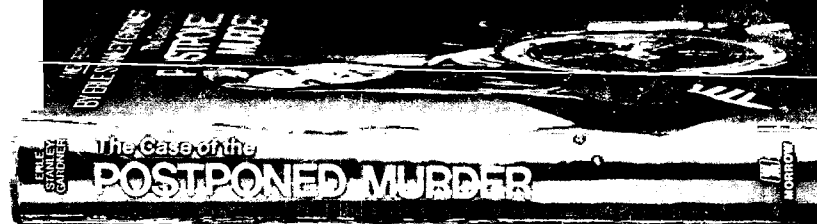


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